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Allegiances

OakClan

Leader- Swiftstar: Black-and-white spotted tom with hazel eyes **8/9 lives**

Deputy- Amberheart: Ginger-and-white she-cat with bright green eyes

Medicine cat- Lilyrose: White-and-dark-gray she-cat with light blue eyes

Medicine cat apprentice- Blackberrythorn: Gray-and-white she-cat with green eyes

Senior warriors-
Poolheart: Gray-and-white tom with yellow eyes

Wildwing: Black tom with spiky fur, brown paws, and green eyes

Rowanflower: Dark ginger she-cat with lighter paws and dark green eyes

Hailfrost: Dark-gray-patched she-cat with light green eyes and lighter patches

Larkflight: Black tom with yellow eyes

Warriors-
Whorlwind: Gray tabby tom with white paws and yellow eyes

Riverwater: White she-cat with gray patches and blue eyes

Topazshine: Black-and-brown she-cat with light blue eyes
Apprentice, Mudpaw

Yonderwatcher: White she-cat with gray ears, forehead, back, tail and yellow-green eyes

Rainclaw: Mottled gray tom with darker markings around his face and yellow eyes

Ripplepool: Black, white, and dark ginger calico she-cat with one blue eye and one yellow eye

Bearheart: Broad-shouldered brown tabby tom with amber eyes and dark stripes

Apprentice, Snippaw

Cypressfern: Silver tabby she-cat with long fur and pale-blue eyes

Tumblespring: Dilute calico tabby tom with green eyes

Rosefall: Dark gray tabby she-cat with orange eyes

Elmstorm: Cream, gray, and brown calico tabby tom with green eyes

Elkstep: Dark gray tabby tom with white paws and amber eyes

Mooseheart: Dark brown tabby tom with white paws and golden-yellow eyes

Diverstripe: Dark gray tabby tom with black stripes and yellow eyes

Smokestream: Smoky-black she-cat with orange eyes

Dacefang: Dark gray tabby tom with amber eyes

Silverwing: Black, cream, and dark ginger tortoiseshell she-cat with blue-green eyes

Flamepool: Dark ginger tabby tom with green eyes

Lionflight: Dark ginger tabby tom with a thick ring of fur around his neck and golden-yellow eyes

Apprentice, Eveningpaw

Dovebreeze: Dark gray she-cat with pale patches and light green eyes

Chiveclaw: Black tom with short, spiky fur and dark green eyes

Briarwish: Spiky-furred, solid black she-cat with yellow eyes

Thornglow: Spiky-furred dark brown mackerel tabby tom with yellow eyes

Hopesun: Ginger-and-white she-cat with hazel eyes

Shimmertail: Light gray and white tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Ripplefire: Ginger tabby tom with dark green eyes

Autumnshade: Dark gray tabby she-cat with pale highlights and yellow-and-green eyes

Beaverfern: Dark gray tom with sparse stripes, lighter markings, and light green eyes

Hemlockstripe: Dark gray tabby tom with white paws and hazel eyes

Lilacshine: Cream-and-gray tabby she-cat with dark stripes and yellow-and-blue eyes

Pennycloud: Fluffy gray-and-white she-cat with green-and-orange eyes

Ebonyshadow: Black, white, and cream calico-tabby tom with blue eyes

Batears: Black tom with white paws, big ears, and hazel eyes

Cherrysoot: Cream tabby she-cat with black spots and blue eyes

Finchspots: Gray-black tom with hazel eyes and white spots

Thymesnow: Cream-and-black patched she-cat with white paws and hazel eyes

Whirlstripe: Cream tabby she-cat with swirling stripes and blue eyes

Raccoonpelt: Black-and-gray tom with white paws and blue eyes

Sprouttuft: Black, cream, and white calico tom with tufted ears and

hazel eyes

Queens-
Pearpool: Cream she-cat with pale-blue eyes (Mother to Larkflight's kits: Pansykit & Thunderkit)

Apprentices-
Eveningpaw: Gray she-cat with black spots, spiky fur, and green eyes

Snippaw: Dark gray tom with black brown paws and light green eyes

Mudpaw: Brown tom with black spots and green eyes

Kits-
Pansykit: Black-and-cream she-cat with blue-green eyes

Thunderkit: Black she-cat with cream highlights and blue-green eyes

Elders-
Redstripe: Ginger-and-white tom with green eyes

Dawnflame: Cream tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Graywolf: Gray she-cat with dark patches and orange eyes

Wolfstripe: Dusty brown tabby tom with lighter paws/muzzle and blue eyes

GlacierClan

Leader- Sparrowstar: Brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes **8/9 lives**

Deputy- Hickorytree: Brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Medicine cat- Newtflake: Dark gray tom with white paws and yellow-green eyes

Medicine cat apprentice- Duskpool: Timid tortoiseshell cat with

amber eyes

Warriors-
Nutfur: Chestnut tom with amber eyes

Foxpelt: Dark calico she-cat with orange eyes and scars all over her body

Pikedive: Gray tabby tom with green eyes

Flamefrost: Yellow tabby tom with blue eyes

Tawnyheart: Calico she-cat with yellow eyes

Hawkflight: Dark gray tabby tom with lighter paws, belly, muzzle, tail tip, a long scar across one flank, and yellow eyes

Sorrelfur: 3 gray-toned she-cat with amber eyes

Furlwatcher: Rustic tabby she-cat with lighter paws and yellow eyes

Leapspeckle: Silver-and-white tabby tom with blue eyes

Vineclaw: Sleek black she-cat with a white patch on her chest and piercing blue eyes

Flintpatch: Gray-and-white tom with broad shoulders, thick fur, and orange eyes

Pinefur: Dark ginger tabby she-cat with sharp green eyes and sleek fur

Birchwing: Silver-and-white mackerel tabby tom with green eyes

Reedstone: Young, lanky light gray tom with blue eyes

Darkwhisper: Black she-cat with heather-blue eyes

Crowflight: Sleek black tom with amber eyes

Condorstrike: Black tom with white flecks and indigo eyes
Apprentice, Quillpaw

Magpiesong: Black-and-white she-cat with purple eyes

Mousewhisker: Brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Stagshade: Dilute calico tom with yellow eyes

Sageheart: Brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes
Apprentice, Tidepaw

Cricketshine: Dark gray tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Storkwing: Black-and-cream tom with yellow eyes

Swampclaw: Cream, gray, and orange calico-tabby she-cat with green eyes

Queens-
Maplewood: Golden-brown tabby she-cat with white paws and amber eyes (Mother to Ollie's kits: Puddlekit, Sunkit, and Kestrelkit)

Apprentices-
Tidepaw: Calico tom with amber eyes

Quillpaw: White, brown, and black calico tom with orange eyes

Kits-
Puddlekit: Golden-brown tom with black "burn" marks and amber eyes

Sunkit: Golden tabby she-cat with white paws and green eyes

Kestrelkit: Black-and-white tom with yellow flecks and yellow-green eyes

DawnClan

Leader- Emberstar: Tortoiseshell tom with dark red/ginger patches and bright purple eyes **6/9 lives**

Deputy- Gingerheart: Bright ginger tabby tom with piercing blue eyes and dark stripes

Medicine cats- Splashnose: Dark blue swirled tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Sunnyshine: Yellow tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Medicine cat apprentice- Orchidfern: Flame-pointed she-cat with a stump for a tail and one blue eye and one gold eye

Warriors-
Fallingash: Cream tabby she-cat with bright blue eyes

Hollyfire: Tortoiseshell she-cat with red patches and holly-colored eyes

Bouldertalon: White-and-gray patched tom with light yellow eyes

Deafears: Black tom with white patches and amber eyes

Snakefoot: Large, slender gray-and-white tom with green eyes and small paws

Russetpelt: Dark ginger tabby she-cat with light yellow eyes

Acornheart: Chestnut-colored she-cat with a bushy ginger tail and yellow eyes

Rootspeckle: Muted-yellow she-cat with one dark paw, one light paw, a light tail tip with two stripes on her tail, and light purple eyes

Moonleaf: Cream-and-white tabby she-cat with green eyes

Sablestorm: Oak-brown tabby she-cat with lighter paws and orange eyes

Nightwind: Dark brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Sandheart: Cream tabby she-cat with pale blue eyes

Mintleaf: Minty-blue tabby she-cat with white paws and teal eyes

Bluewhisker: Blue-gray she-cat with dark cream patches and yellow

eyes

Flutterbird: Dark cream tabby tom with white markings and blue eyes

Azuregaze: Creamy-white she-cat with dark cream stripes with one blue eye and one yellow eye

Turtleshell: Dark gray, cream, and white calico tabby tom with green eyes

Rainsweptfire: Red-gray tabby she-cat with dark stripes and orange eyes

Rowanwillow: Sandy-colored tabby she-cat with green eyes and lighter paws

Nectarshine: Golden-brown tabby she-cat with dark stripes and one blue eye and one green eye

Pinestorm: Oak-brown tabby tom with dark stripes and pale-blue eyes

Mossleap: Blue-gray she-cat with lighter paws and green eyes

Lavenderflower: Pinkish-gray she-cat with a dark forehead, back, tail, with a lighter muzzle, chest, underbelly, paws, tail tip and blue eyes

Grasswing: Gray, white, and ginger calico tabby she-cat with one orange eye and one blue eye

Halfshard: Half gray, half ginger tom with bright blue eyes
Apprentice, Spiderpaw

Mothpatch: Gray she-cat with a white face mask and purple eyes

Moonwillow: Dark blue tabby tom with amber eyes

Feathermoon: Dilute calico-tabby tom with blue eyes

Burncloud: Honey-brown tabby she-cat with amber-and-blue eyes

Peachheart: Cream, brown, and ginger calico-tabby she-cat with blue eyes
Apprentice, Windpaw

Emberhoney: Cream lynx-pointed tom with blue eyes

Yewpatch: White-and-ginger tom with yellow eyes

Cardinalspiral: Red-brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes and cream highlights
Apprentice, Doepaw

Sootleaf: Dark brown tabby she-cat with yellow-green eyes

Ravenfern: Gray, white, and orange calico tom with green eyes

Cypresswillow: Gray-and-white she-cat with green eyes

Apprentices-
Doepaw: Light brown she-cat with white spots and green eyes

Windpaw: Brown tabby tom with swirling stripes, long legs, and amber eyes

Spiderpaw: Black tom with brown highlights and green eyes

Elders-
Leaffire: Brown-and-white tabby she-cat with light blue eyes and a deep bite scar on her throat

Fennelfur: Sandy-colored she-cat with blue eyes

Mistlesky: Dark blue-gray tabby she-cat with lighter paws and blue eyes

NightClan

Leader- Maplestar: Tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with yellow eyes **8/9 lives**

Deputy- Heronstripe: White she-cat with a green left eye and blue right eye

Medicine cat- Poolripple: Pale brown tom with orange eyes

Medicine cat apprentice- Larkshell: Black she-cat with white paws and purple eyes

Warriors-
Shelltail: Brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Brokenflower: Black she-cat with blue eyes

Cloverheart: Calico she-cat with blue eyes

Otterflower: Brown she-cat with green eyes

Skiptail: White she-cat with black paws, ear tips, tail tip, and orange eyes

Brightnose: Black-and-white she-cat with asymmetrical patches with purple-blue eyes

Jaggedsong: Light brown she-cat with light green eyes and lighter paws

Birchspring: Brown tabby she-cat with dark stripes and amber eyes

Barksplash: Dark red-brown tabby tom with large paws and amber eyes

Alderfall: Red-orange tabby tom with yellow eyes and white markings

Avianwish: Black, white, and brown calico she-cat with purple eyes

Serpentstrike: Brown tabby tom with dark stripes, white highlights, and blue eyes

Hawthornsplash: Ginger, black, and white calico-tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Barleystalk: Chimera tom with amber-and-blue eyes

Nettlethorn: Black-and-white tom with amber eyes

Beechpool: Pale-brown tabby she-cat with white splotches and half-blue, half-purple eyes

Juniperfoot: White tom with black paws and amber eyes

Swanwish: White she-cat with a black face mask and blue-and-amber eyes

Chestnutstorm: Black tabby tom with amber eyes

Snowtrail: Dark red-brown tabby tom with white paws and amber eyes

Stonebriar: Red-brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Foxstep: Orange-and-white tom with black ears, legs, tail, and green eyes

Vixenfrost: Orange-and-white she-cat with black ears, legs, tail, and blue eyes

Streamflow: Dilute calico-tabby tom with yellow-and-blue eyes

Speckledawn: Dilute calico tom with blue eyes

Hornetstorm: Dark red tabby tom with black stripes, white paws, chest, belly, tail tip, and blue-green eyes
Apprentice, Bumblepaw

Apprentices-
Bumblepaw: Ginger-and-white tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Queens-
Flamewhisker: Red-brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes (Mother to Serpentstrike's kits: Brindlekit, Snailkit, and Gorsekit)

Kits-
Brindlekit: Brown, red, and white tortoiseshell she-cat with amber-and-blue eyes

Snailkit: Brown tabby tom with a reddish-brown tint and amber eyes

Gorsekit: Red-brown tabby tom with blue eyes

Elders-
Shredsplash: Blue tabby she-cat with shredded ears and amber eyes

Firestripe: Ginger tabby tom with amber eyes

Snowmask: Black she-cat with a white face and blue eyes

Cats Outside The Clans

Ash: Pale-gray tom with a lean frame and blind blue eyes

Ollie: Black-and-white tom with yellow-green eyes, barn cat

Prologue

The cool stillness of the medicine den wrapped around Lilyrose as she lay curled in her nest, the scent of herbs mingling with the dampness that lingered from the floodwaters. Sleep had come reluctantly after a day of treating soaked, shivering warriors and reinforcing the den's walls against the ceaseless rain. But now, a different presence stirred her awake– not the sounds of her Clanmates, but the sudden weight of silence.

Lilyrose blinked, her blue eyes adjusting to a pale light that wasn't moonlight. She sat up sharply, her fur prickling. The walls of her den had melted away, replaced by a misty expanse. The ground beneath her paws was soft, a blanket of silvery moss that shimmered with starlight.

"Lilyrose."

The voice made her turn, her breath catching in her throat. A familiar tortoiseshell figure emerged from the mist, her fur flecked with the light of StarClan. Mottlesong, one of OakClan's revered medicine cats from Nightstar's time, stood before her with a gentle and grave expression.

"Mottlesong," she whispered, her voice trembling. "What is this? Why are you here?"

The former medicine cat's eyes were kind, but they glimmered with something darker– worry. She stepped closer, her movements fluid and silent, like a shadow in water. "I had to speak with you, Lilyrose. Time is short, and danger is growing."

Lilyrose's ears flicked back. "Danger? What kind of danger?"

"The floods," Mottlesong said, her voice low but steady. "They have done more than test OakClan's strength. They have weakened the veil."

"The veil?" Lilyrose echoed, her tail lashing. "You mean the boundary between StarClan and the living world?"

Mottlesong nodded gravely. "Yes. But it is not only StarClan that grows closer." Her gaze darkened, shadows flickering in her starry pelt. "The Dark Forest stirs."

The name sent a chill down Lilyrose's spine. Every kit learned the tales of the Dark Forest– where the most treacherous and cruel cats roamed after death. But those stories were just that: stories. Weren't they?

"What do you mean, 'stirs'?" Lilyrose demanded, her voice sharper than she intended. "What are they doing?"

"They are reaching," Mottlesong replied, her tone heavy with foreboding. "Their whispers are growing louder, their claws stretching into the living world. The floods have uncovered something– something they can use. A stone, ancient and powerful, buried for generations. It has been exposed."

"A stone?" Lilyrose repeated, her paws digging into the silvery moss. "What stone? What danger can a stone bring?"

Mottlesong's gaze drifted, as if she were peering into a distance only she could see. "The exposed stone will shatter," she murmured, her voice like the wind through brittle leaves. "And so will the Clans."

The words struck Lilyrose like a blow, leaving her momentarily breathless. "What does that mean?" she pressed, her claws unsheathing. "How can a stone destroy the Clans? What can I do to stop this?"

Mottlesong's eyes softened, but her expression remained grave. "That is all I know. StarClan's vision ends there. But listen, Lilyrose– heed this warning. The Dark Forest thrives on fear and division. Keep OakClan safe. Do not let them sink their claws into your Clan."

"But I don't know where to start," Lilyrose whispered, her voice breaking. "How can I fight an enemy I can't see?"

"You will find the strength," Mottlesong said gently, stepping closer

to touch her nose to Lilyrose's forehead. "Your Clanmates will look to you for guidance. Do not waver. Trust in your heart and in StarClan's light."

Before Lilyrose could ask more, Mottlesong began to fade, her starry form unraveling like smoke caught in the wind.

"Mottlesong, wait!" Lilyrose cried, stepping forward. "Please, tell me more– what should I do? What about the stone?"

But the tortioseshell was gone, her final words echoing in the empty mist: "The stone will shatter. And so will the Clans."

Chapter 1

[image]

Mudpaw bounded through the waterlogged forest, his paws splashing noisily in the shallow pools that had swallowed much of OakClan's hunting grounds. The air was thick with the scent of wet bark and mud, a reminder of how the relentless rains had reshaped the once-familiar territory.

He paused on a patch of damp grass, his ears pricked for any sign of prey. The floodwaters had driven many animals away, and the prey OakClan relied on was becoming harder to find. But Mudpaw refused to return to camp empty-pawed. His Clanmates needed him, and he wasn't about to let them down.

Come on, there's gotta be something out here, he thought, lifting his nose to sniff the air. His stomach gave a faint grumble, and he flicked his tail in determination.

The soft flutter of wings caught his attention, and Mudpaw crouched instinctively. Ahead, perched on a low branch above a soggy patch of earth, was a blackbird preening its feathers. His whiskers twitched with excitement. Blackbirds were rare these days– a catch like that would earn him the praise of the whole Clan.

Slowly, he crept forward, each pawstep careful and deliberate. The mud squelched beneath his pads, but he barely noticed. His green eyes locked on the bird, his heart pounding with anticipation.

When he was just a tail-length away, the blackbird raised its head, its beady eyes scanning the area. Mudpaw froze, his muscles coiled like a spring. The bird hesitated for a moment before resuming its preening.

Now.

Mudpaw lunged, his claws outstretched. The bird let out a startled squawk, but it was too late. His paws connected, and the bird

flapped helplessly in his grip before going still.

"Yes!" he exclaimed, his tail lashing with pride. He stood over his catch, his chest puffed out as if he'd just taken down a hawk. *Topazshine's gonna be so impressed when I bring this back!*

He grabbed the blackbird in his jaws and started back toward camp, his paws skirting the edges of the floodwaters. The going was slow– every step seemed to sink deeper into the soft, muddy ground– but Mudpaw didn't mind. The thrill of the hunt still buzzed in his veins, and the thought of seeing his Clanmates' faces when they saw his catch made the effort worth it.

The trees around him were quieter than usual, the usual rustle of undergrowth replaced by the gentle lap of water against roots. He paused again, his ears swiveling. The silence was unsettling, like the forest was holding its breath.

"Mudpaw, don't freak yourself out," he muttered through the feathers of the blackbird.

But as he continued walking, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was... wrong. The air felt heavier, the shadows deeper. He glanced over his shoulder, half-expecting the see a pair of eyes staring back at him.

You're just imagining things, he told himself firmly. *Probably just a fox out here somewhere. Nothing I can't handle.*

Ahead, the ground began to slope upward– a rare patch of dry land. Mudpaw's spirits lifted as he padded up the incline, his claws scraping against the firm soil. At the top, he paused to catch his breath, dropping the blackbird at his paws.

The view was... strange. From here, he could see how the floodwaters had turned the forest into a maze of muddy pools and tangled roots. But what caught his eye was a gleaming shape jutting out of the water far below. It was small from a distance, barely larger than a pawprint, but it shone with an eerie light that sent a shiver down his spine.

Curiosity burned in Mudpaw's chest. He glanced back toward the direction of camp, then down at the blackbird. *It'll only take a moment to check it out...*

Decision made, he tucked the bird into a secure crevice between two tree roots and bounded down the slope toward the strange stone. As he drew closer, the light seemed to pulse faintly, like a heartbeat. The water around it shimmered unnaturally, rippling even though there was no wind.

When he finally reached the edge of the pool, Mudpaw hesitated. The gleaming stone was half-buried in the mud, its surface etched with strange, jagged lines. It didn't look like any stone he'd seen before– and he knew the forest like the back of his paw.

He leaned closer, his nose wrinkling at the faint bloodlike scent that wafted up. For a moment, he considered calling for Topazshine. But then, a faint whisper brushed his ears.

"Mudpaw..."

He froze, his fur standing on end. The voice was soft and distant, like wind through the trees, but it carried a strange weight that made his paws tremble.

"Who's there?" he called, his voice cracking slightly.

Silence.

Mudpaw's instincts screamed at him to back away, but his curiosity rooted him to the spot. He took a cautious step closer, the mud sucking at his paws. The whispers came again, faint but insistent, the voices layered atop one another.

"Mudpaw... come closer..."

He bolted.

His paws churned through the mud as he scrambled back up the slope, his breath coming in ragged gasps. He didn't stop until he reached the patch of dry ground where he'd left his blackbird. Grabbing the prey in his jaws, he ran without looking back, his tail

bristling.

When he finally reached the safety of OakClan's camp, he dropped the bird in the fresh-kill pile and slunk toward the apprentices' den, his mind spinning.

Mudpaw...

The whisper echoed in his head, sending a chill through his fur. Whatever he'd found out there in the floodlands, it wasn't just a stone. And he had a sinking feeling he hadn't seen the last of it.

*****

The early morning air was damp, a faint mist clinging to the undergrowth as Mudpaw padded after Topazshine. His paws squelched with each step through the mud, and the faint hum of mosquitoes was a constant, annoying buzz in his ears. Despite the dreariness of the floodlands, his curiosity burned bright, a flicker of excitement beneath the nervous flutter in his chest.

"Do you think it's something serious?" Mudpaw asked, breaking the silence. He glanced at Topazshine, his tail flicking restlessly.

The dark-furred warrior glanced over her shoulder, her light blue eyes calm but watchful. "Probably not," she said. "The rain's been relentless. Most of the prey around here have probably gone to higher ground. Can't blame them; I'd run too if my den was underwater." She offered a small smile, but Mudpaw noticed how her ears stayed pricked, swiveling toward every distant rustle or splash.

Mudpaw tried to swallow the unease prickling in his chest. "But what if it's something else?" He hesitated, then added, "Like... something dangerous?"

Topazshine flicked her tail dismissively. "Dangerous? Mudpaw, I've seen you face a fox without flinching. Don't tell me you're scared of a little water."

"I'm not scared!" Mudpaw protested, puffing out his chest. "I just–" His words faltered as they emerged into a clearing where the

floodwaters spread wide, glinting like murky glass under the faint sunlight.

The sight was eerie. Trees stood half-submerged, their roots twisting beneath the water like grasping claws. The air was thick with the scent of stagnant water and wet earth. Mudpaw's fur prickled, but he kept his gaze steady, scanning for any sign of prey– or trouble.

Topazshine stepped closer to the water's edge, her paws sinking slightly into the mud. "See? Nothing here but a flooded mess. Any prey with sense has gone elsewhere."

Mudpaw wasn't so sure. He narrowed his eyes, his gaze sweeping across the water. Something felt... wrong. His ears twitched at the faint sound of ripples, almost too quiet to notice. Then he saw it– a shadow gliding beneath the surface, slow and deliberate.

"Topazshine," he whispered, his voice tight.

The warrior turned, her expression puzzled. "What is it–?"

Before she could finish, the water erupted. A massive, scaly snout broke through the surface, teeth flashing as the creature lunged toward them with terrifying speed.

"Look out!" Mudpaw yowled. Without thinking, he leaped at Topazshine, shoving her toward the nearest tree. The warrior staggered but quickly understood, scrambling up the trunk with Mudpaw right behind her.

The creature's jaws snapped shut just below Mudpaw's tail, the sound a bone-chilling crack that made his fur stand on end. Perched on a sturdy branch, he stared down at the thing as it thrashed in the water, its powerful tail sending waves rippling through the floodlands.

Topazshine was hissing furiously, her claws scraping the bark as she adjusted her balance. "What in StarClan's name is *that* doing here?" she spat, light blue eyes blazing as she glared at the creature below.

Mudpaw's heart pounded, his claws digging into the branch. "What...what is that?"

"It's a caiman," Topazshine replied. "Smaller than a crocodile, but not by much." She lashed her tail, her voice bitter. "Rain must've swelled the rivers and let this thing wander right into our territory. *Wonderful*."

The caiman circled the tree, its eyes gleaming like dark stones above the surface. Every so often, it lunged at the trunk, its jaws gnashing. Mudpaw felt the branch tremble slightly with each strike, and he pressed himself closer to the bark.

"Do you think it could reach the camp if the rain keeps coming?" he asked, his voice barely above a fearful whisper.

Topazshine hesitated, her ears flicking back. "I don't know," she admitted, her usual confidence slipping. "But we can't take that risk. We need to tell Swiftstar and Amberheart as soon as we're back."

Mudpaw nodded, swallowing hard. His paws felt heavy, but his determination burned brighter now. If this thing was a danger to OakClan, he'd do whatever it took to help protect his Clanmates.

The caiman finally gave up, retreating into the water with a splash. Mudpaw and Topazshine waited until the ripples settled before climbing down cautiously, their muscles tense and ears alert.

As they turned back toward camp, the floodlands seemed darker than before, the air heavy with a sense of foreboding. Mudpaw glanced over his shoulder, half-expecting to see the caiman watching them from the shadows.

"Come on," Topazshine said, her voice firm but strained. "Let's get moving. We'll figure out what to do once the Clan knows."

Mudpaw nodded, quickening his pace. His earlier excitement had shifted into a deep unease. The floodwaters had brought more than just displaced prey– they had brought danger. And something told him this was only the beginning.

Chapter 2

The water shimmered in the early afternoon sun, casting rippling patterns across the marshy shallows. Bumblepaw grinned as she padded carefully across the soggy ground, her paws sinking slightly with each step. This part of the marsh was her favorite– quiet, serene, and dotted with pools deep enough for fishing but shallow enough to wade into without too much trouble.

Her collection pouch, a small bundle of cobwebs and leaves tied with reeds, swayed against her chest. It wasn't much, but it did the job. Inside, a smoothe, pearly shell clicked against a tiny, blue-speckled rock she'd found that morning. She couldn't wait to show Larkshell.

Larkshell always loved these little treasures. Bumblepaw thought about her best friend and grinned wider. Larkshell's face always lit up when she got a new shell or rock to add to her ever-growing collection. The medicine cat apprentice didn't say much, but Bumblepaw had learned to read the small changes in her expressions, the way her tail flicked in excitement or how her paws shuffled when she was happy.

"Another pretty shell for the pile," Bumblepaw murmured to herself as she crouched beside a pool, her whiskers twitching. She dipped a paw into the water, stirring gently until the silt cleared. Beneath the surface, a flat stone with streaks of orange caught her eyes. She reached in, her claws curling around it, and pulled it out with a triumphant flick of her tail.

"Perfect," she said, placing the stone into her pouch. "Larkshell's going to love this one."

Her satisfaction was interrupted by the sound of pawsteps squelching through the marsh behind her. Bumblepaw glanced over her shoulder to see Hornetstorm approaching, his blue-green eyes narrowing slightly as he took in the scene.

"You've been at this all morning," he said, his tone firm but not unkind. "You do remember we're supposed to be training, right?"

Bumblepaw straightened up, shaking water from her paw. "I know, I know. But look!" She bounded over to him, holding out the pouch. "I found this amazing shell and–"

"Bumblepaw," Hornetstorm interrupted with a sigh, though his gaze softened. "You can share your shells with Larkshell later. Right now, we have patrols to finish. Fish aren't going to catch themselves."

Bumblepaw pouted but didn't argue. She knew Hornetstorm wasn't really mad; he never was, not with her. She could tell by the way his whiskers twitched, betraying a hint of amusement.

"Fine," she said, tucking the pouch securely against her chest. "But I'm keeping these with me. They're important."

Hornetstorm rolled his eyes but didn't press the issue. "Just don't let them distract you while we're working," he said. "Come on. There's a pool near the west border I want to check. The water there is deep enough for bigger fish."

As they walked, Bumblepaw kept an eye out for more treasures, her ears flicking at the faint sound of frogs croaking in the distance. The marsh was alive with the hum of insects and the occasional rustle of reeds. It was peaceful, in its own swampy way.

"Do you ever think the marsh is pretty?" she asked suddenly, glancing at Hornetstorm.

The older tom gave her a sideways look. "Pretty?"

"Yeah, you know." Bumblepaw gestured with her tail at the water and reeds. "The way the sunlight makes the pools sparkle, or how the moss on the trees looks all soft and green... It's nice."

Hornetstorm huffed a quiet laugh. "I suppose. If you don't mind the mud and smell."

Bumblepaw grinned. "The mud is the best part!" She leaped ahead, splashing through a shallow pool, and Hornetstorm groaned.

"You're going to scare off all the fish," he muttered, though there was no real anger in his voice.

They spent the next while in companionable silence, working through their patrol. Bumblepaw managed to catch a small trout, which she added proudly to their growing pile of prey. But her mind kept drifting back to her collection and the thought of surprising Larkshell.

By the time they returned to camp, the sun was dipping lower, casting golden light across the marsh. Bumblepaw dropped her share of prey on the fresh-kill pile before darting toward the medicine den, her pouch swinging with each step.

"Larkshell!" she called, peeking into the shadowy den. The faint scent of herbs tickled her nose, and she spotted Larkshell hunched over a bundle of greenery, her tail twitching in concentration.

The black-and-white she-cat looked up at the sound of Bumblepaw's voice, her bright eyes narrowing slightly in curiosity. Bumblepaw trotted over, her excitement bubbling over as she opened the pouch.

"Look what I found!" she said, tipping the contents onto the den floor. The pearly shell, blue-speckled rock, and the streaked stone tumbled out, catching the dim light.

Larkshell's ears perked, and her tail stilled. She reached out with a paw, touching the blue-speckled rock lightly before looking up at Bumblepaw.

"Pretty," she said softly, her voice barely above a whisper.

Bumblepaw beamed. "I knew you'd like it! That one reminded me of the sky after it rains. And this shell? It's almost as striking as your fur!"

Larkshell's whiskers twitched, and she tucked the treasures neatly beside her nest. Bumblepaw felt a warm glow of pride, knowing she'd made her friend happy.

"Thank you," Larkshell murmured, her tone sincere.

"Anytime," Bumblepaw said, flopping onto her side with a sigh. "You know, I think I caught the prettiest shell in the marsh today. But Hornetstorm says I have to focus more on my training."

Larkshell didn't respond, but the small flick of her tail told Bumblepaw she was listening. The two sat in a comfortable silence, the soft hum of the marsh just outside the den.

For Bumblepaw, moments like this were what made life in NightClan so special. The marshes, the treasures, her best friend– it all felt like home. And no matter what challenges came her way, she knew she'd always have Larkshell to share her adventures with.

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The marsh hummed with life: the rhythmic drone of crickets, the occasional splash of unseen creatures in the water, and the faint breeze stirring the reeds. Bumblepaw padded lightly along the muddy path, her yellow eyes wide with curiosity. She sniffed the air, the tang of damp moss and stagnant water filling her nose.

"This place feels alive, doesn't it?" she mused, glancing back at her mentor.

Hornetstorm, his dark red tabby fur streaked with mud, gave her a pointed look. "Focus on the task, Bumblepaw. We're not here to admire the marsh."

"I *am* focused!" Bumblepaw protested, though her paws were already straying toward a patch of reeds swaying oddly in the breeze. Something about the movement drew her in. "Do you hear that?"

Hornetstorm paused, his ears swiveling. "Hear what?"

"That... croaking." Bumblepaw crouched, her ears twitching as she honed in on the sound. "It's different. Almost... musical?"

Hornetstorm sighed, his tail flicking in irritation. "Probably a frog. We're here to check for prey signs, not chase after noise. Stay close."

But Bumblepaw was already creeping toward the reeds, her paws

sinking into the damp earth. As she parted the stalks, a sudden loud *crack* startled her. She froze, her heart pounding, as a flurry of wings erupted before her.

A heron shot into the sky, its wings beating the air with a thunderous whoosh. Feathers scattered as it let out a piercing cry. Bumblepaw stumbled back, splashing into a shallow puddle.

"Bumblepaw!" Hornetstorm's furious yowl echoed across the marsh. He stormed through the reeds, his blue-green eyes blazing. "What in StarClan's name are you doing?"

"I–I heard something and wanted to see what it was," Bumblepaw stammered, her fur bristling.

"And scared off every piece of prey in the process!" Hornetstorm snapped, his tail lashing. "You you have any idea how much noise you just made? You might as well announce our presence to the entire territory!"

Bumblepaw's ears flattened, shame prickling her pelt. "I didn't mean to–"

"Intentions don't matter, Bumblepaw," Hornetstorm interrupted, his voice cutting like a claw. "If this were a hunting patrol, you'd have ruined it for the entire Clan."

"I was just curious," Bumblepaw muttered, her gaze dropping to the muddy ground.

"Curiosity doesn't feed the Clan," Hornetstorm growled, his frustration clear. He turned sharply, his claws sinking into the mud. "We're heading back. And you'll explain your actions to Maplestar."

Bumblepaw's head shot up, panic flickering in her eyes. "Maplestar? But that's not fair!"

Hornetstorm stopped, his gaze hard. "Fairness doesn't come into it, Bumblepaw. You need to learn discipline. Maplestar will decide if you're ready to act like a warrior."

Bumblepaw bit her tongue, her frustration bubbling beneath her

shame. She trudged after her mentor, the marsh suddenly feeling colder and less inviting.

*****

Bumblepaw sat alone in the apprentices' den, her chin resting on her paws. Loneliness crept into her heart as she stared around at the empty den. She had no other warrior-apprentices other than herself.

The soft sound of pawsteps drew her attention. Larkshell approached, her movements deliberate and her unnatural purple eyes gleamed in the moonlight. A small bundle of herbs hung from her jaws. She set it down and studied Bumblepaw with a tilt of her head.

"You look miserable," Larkshell observed bluntly, her tone matter-of-fact. "What happened?"

Bumblepaw hesitated, then sighed. "I messed up again. Hornetstorm's furious with me."

Larkshell settled beside her, her tail curling neatly over her paws. "What did you do this time?"

"I scared off a heron while we were patrolling," Bumblepaw admitted, her ears drooping. "I wasn't even trying to mess up. I just... wanted to see what it was."

"Typical," Larkshell said, though her tone wasn't harsh. "You get distracted easily. Hornetstorm should know that by now."

"He does," Bumblepaw muttered. "That's why he's so mad. He's taking me to Maplestar tomorrow."

Larkshell hummed thoughtfully. "Hornetstorm's harsh, but he's not cruel. He's trying to teach you something. Maybe you should listen for once."

Bumblepaw bristled, though she knew her friend was right. "I *do* listen!"

"Not well enough, apparently," Larkshell replied, her voice calm but

firm. "You're curious. That's a good thing. But you need to learn when to act on it and when to hold back. Otherwise, you'll keep getting in trouble."

Bumblepaw sighed, her frustration ebbing slightly. "You're right. I just... wish I wasn't always messing up."

Larkshell nudged her shoulder lightly, which surprised Bumblepaw. Larkshell didn't like physical touch. "You're not always messing up. You're learning. Big difference."

A small smile tugged at Bumblepaw's lips. "You sound like a wise old elder."

"Good," Larkshell said with a faint smile. "I'd be a better elder than most warriors."

The two shared a quiet laugh, and for the first time all day, Bumblepaw felt a flicker of hope. She might not be perfect, but she didn't have to be. Tomorrow, she'd face Maplestar– and she'd prove that she was more than her mistakes.

Chapter 3

[image]

Mudpaw's paws were still trembling as he followed Topazshine into Swiftstar's den. The familiar earthy scent of the den was laced with the faint tang of moss, but it did nothing to calm the pounding of his heart.

Amberheart was already there, her ginger-and-white coat sleek and composed, though her sharp green eyes immediately narrowed at their disheveled appearance.

"What happened?" Amberheart asked, concern clipping her tone.

Mudpaw tried to speak, but his voice cracked. Topazshine stepped in, her usual confidence strained but steady. "We were patrolling near the floodlands, trying to figure out why prey has been scarce." She hesitated, her tail lashing behind her. "There's a caiman in the water."

Amberheart blinked, her calm demeanor vanishing in an instant. "A *caiman*?"

"Yes," Topazshine said grimly. "A massive one. It came out of nowhere. We only escaped because we climbed a tree."

Mudpaw finally found his voice, the words tumbling out in a rush. "It was huge– easily as long as a fox, maybe longer. It was swimming so fast, and its teeth–" He shuddered, his mind flashing back to the jagged rows of teeth snapping dangerously close to his tail.

Swiftstar emerged from the shadows at the back of the den, his spotted pelt gleaming faintly in the dim light. His hazel gaze was piercing as he strode forward. "Tell me everything, from the beginning."

Topazshine nodded, taking a deep breath. "We started near the edge

of the floodlands. The ground was muddy, and the water was higher than usual. At first, there wasn't much– just signs that prey had been disturbed, like trampled grass and over turned rocks."

"And then?" Swiftstar prompted, his voice calm and steady.

"Then Mudpaw spotted something in the water," Topazshine continued, flicking her tail toward her apprentice.

"I saw ripples," Mudpaw added quickly. "It didn't look like prey. It was... bigger. Heavier. I didn't even know what it was at first, but then it got closer, and–" He broke off, his breath hitching.

"It lunged at us," Topazshine finished, her tone hardening. "If Mudpaw hadn't shoved me toward that tree, it might've grabbed onto one of us. We barely made it up in time."

Amberheart's claws scraped against the ground as she paced. "Floodwaters are bad enough, but a caiman? That's not just prey being disturbed– it's a predator *claiming* our territory."

Swiftstar's tail flicked, a rare sign of unease. "How far into the floodlands was it?"

"Not far," Topazshine admitted. "Maybe a few fox-lengths beyond the old cedar grove. But with the water rising, it could easily move closer."

Mudpaw's voice rose, sharper than he intended. "What if it comes here? What if it follows the rivers and finds its way to camp?"

A heavy silence fell over the den.

Amberheart stopped pacing, her gaze meeting Swiftstar's. "We need a plan. This isn't something we can ignore."

Swifstar's ears twitched, his gaze distant for a moment before he refocused on the two cats before him. "You did well to report this quickly," he said, his voice measured. "Amberheart, call a Clan meeting. The others need to know."

The deputy nodded and breezily left the den with a flick of her tail.

Mudpaw watched her go, anxiety rising in his chest as he turned back to his leader.

Swiftstar met his gaze and gave him a reassuring smile, his eyes softening. It was as if he was silently telling the frightened apprentice that it was going to be okay.

Amberheart's yowl split the air moments later, sharp and commanding as she leapt onto the large elm tree in the center of the camp. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Tall Tree for a Clan meeting!"

Mudpaw chose to sit near the back of the growing crowd, his fur prickling with anxiety. Beside him, Topazshine's tail brushed against his shoulder– a silent reassurance. Cats streamed in from all directions, their pelts bristling with unease as whispers spread like wildfire.

"What's this about?" hissed Snippaw, his littermate, as he crouched beside Mudpaw. "Did something happen on your patrol?"

"You'll find out," Mudpaw mumbled, his gaze fixed on Swifstar, who emerged from his den with purposeful strides.

Swiftstar leapt onto the Tall Tree alongside Amberheart, his hazel eyes sweeping over the assembled cats. "We've recieved troubling news," he began, his voice steady but heavy with tension.

The murmurs grew louder until Amberheart raised her tail for silence.

"This concerns all of us," Amberheart continued. "Topazshine and Mudpaw encountered a caiman near the floodlands."

Gasps erupted from the crowd. Cats exchanged wide-eyed glanced, their fur fluffed with alarm.

"A caiman?" growled Poolheart, a wiry senior warrior. "In our territory?"

"It's the floodwaters," Topazshine spoke up, stepping forward. "They're bringing more than just prey closer to our camp. This

creature is large, fast, and dangerous. We were lucky to escape."

"Lucky?" Graywolf, an elder, curled her lip. "If that thing's out there, none of us are safe!"

"We're not defenseless," Swifstar said firmly, his voice cutting through the rising panic. "But we need to act quickly and with caution." He gestured toward Amberheart.

"First," Amberheart said, her tone brisk, "no cat is to go near the floodlands alone. Apprentices will remain in camp unless accompanied by a warrior. We'll also patrol the rivers more frequently to track the caiman's movements."

"What if it comes to our camp?" Eveningpaw blurted out, her green eyes wide with fear.

"Camp is surrounded by water," hissed Pearpool, a permanent nursery queen. "It's only a matter of time before it finds its way here!"

Swifstar's gaze darkened, and he raised his tail for silence. "We'll take precautions. Sandbar patrols will be increased, and we'll fortify the camp's edges with brambles and sharpened roots. The caiman isn't invincible. If it comes too close, we'll drive it out– or kill it."

Mudpaw's stomach churned at the thought of fighting the beast. Its snapping jaws and cold, calculating eyes flashed in his mind.

"But we've never faced something like this before," murmured Larkflight, a black tom near the front of the crowd. "How can we be sure we'll succeed?"

"We have no choice," Amberheart said sharply. "If we give in to fear, we might as well surrender our territory entirely."

Topazshine stepped forward again, her voice calm but commanding. "I saw Mudpaw act bravely today, saving me when I was caught off guard. We'll need that same courage from every one of you."

Mudpaw's ears burned as several cats glanced his way, their expressions a mix of surprise and respect.

Swiftstar stood tall beside Amberheart. "This is our land," he declared, his voice strong and unyielding. "The floodwaters may rise, and dangers may creep closer, but OakClan will stand strong. We will protect our home."

A chorus of determined yowls rose from the gathered cats, though tension lingered like a shadow in the air.

As the Clan began to disperse, Mudpaw felt Topazshine's gaze on him. "You did well today," she murmured. "Don't let the fear get to you."

"I'll try," Mudpaw replied, though his paws still tingled with the memory of wet bark and snapping jaws.

As the camp settled into a restless buzz of activity, Mudpaw couldn't shake a single, chilling thought: *What if the caiman wasn't the only danger the floodwaters brought?*

Chapter 4

Bumblepaw padded into NightClan's camp with her head high and her jaws full of shimmering fish. Their scales caught the waning sunlight, sparkling like silver as she made her way to the fresh-kill pile. Pride warmed her chest. This was her best catch since becoming an apprentice– she'd outdone herself. She flicked her tail with satisfaction, her whiskers twitching as she imagined her Clanmates praising her haul.

But her mood soured as hushed voices floated toward her from near the apprentices' den.

"Did you see her earlier? Dragging back rocks again," Snailpaw's voice was thick with disdain. "She acts more like a magpie than a warrior."

Gorsepaw snickered in response. "You mean a kit. She's always chasing shiny things instead of prey. If Hornetstorm weren't her mentor, she'd have been sent back to the nursery by now."

Bumblepaw froze mid-step, her ears angling sharply toward the sound. Her heart sank, a sharp pang of humiliation twisting in her chest. The fish in her jaws suddenly felt heavier.

They don't know what they're talking about, she thought, trying to shake off the sting. *They've just become apprentices. They don't know me.* But their words bit deep, clawing at her confidence.

Her paws moved on their own, carrying her closer to the apprentices' den. When she rounded the corner, she saw Snailpaw and Gorsepaw lounging in the shade, their fur sleek and unruffled as though they hadn't lifted a paw all day.

"You two have a lot to say for cats who haven't caught anything useful," Bumblepaw snapped, dropping her prey with a thud.

Both apprentices were startled, but Snailpaw quickly recovered, his

amber eyes narrowing. "At least we're focused on Clan duties, not collecting trash."

Gorsepaw smirked, leaning back on his haunches. "How many shells did you bring back this time, Bumblepaw? Or was it just one fish and a shiny pebble?"

Bumblepaw's fur bristled, her claws flexing against the sandy ground. She stepped closer, her voice trembling with anger. "You think you're so much better? I bet I can catch more prey in one outing than you two combined!"

Snailpaw's whiskers twitched with amusement, but there was a spark of irritation in his eyes. "Oh really? Care to prove it?"

Gorsepaw's grin widened. "This'll be good. The magpie versus actual hunters."

"Fine!" Bumblepaw growled, her tail lashing. "Let's see who can bring back the most prey before sundown. Unless you're scared you'll lose to a magpie?"

Snailpaw's eyes narrowed, and he shot to his paws. "You're on. But don't cry when you embarrass yourself."

Gorsepaw stood too, his red-brown tabby fur brushing against Snailpaw's. "Better hope Hornetstorm doesn't catch you slacking again. He might actually take our side this time."

Bumblepaw's heart pounded as she turned sharply and stormed toward the camp entrance, her paws tingling with a mixture of fury and determination.

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As Bumblepaw darted through the dense marshland, her mind raced. She could still hear Snailpaw's smug laughter echoing in her ears. *They don't think I can do it. They think I'm weak.* Her claws sank into the soft, muddy ground as she forced herself to focus.

The smell of water and mud filled the air, familiar and comforting in its own way. Bumblepaw slowed as she approached a wide, slow-

moving stream. The water was clear, the afternoon sun casting dappled light across its surface.

She crouched by the edge, her gaze sharp as she scanned for movement beneath the water. Her claws flexed, ready to strike. As flash of silver darted past, and she lashed out, sending droplets flying. A sleek trout flopped onto the bank, its body thrashing.

"Got you," she muttered, biting down swiftly to end its struggle.

Her tail flicked with satisfaction as she set the trout beside her. She stayed perfectly still, her eyes locked on the water. After a few moments, another shadow flickered beneath the surface. She struck again, but this time she missed, her claws slicing through empty water.

Frustration prickled at her fur, but she shook it off. *Stay calm. Focus.*

She moved further downstream, where the current was slower and the fish lingered in deeper pools. As she crouched again, something shiny caught her eye– a shell, half-buried in the mud near the water's edge.

Her heart fluttered. It was smooth and pearly, the kind of shell Larkshell would love. For a moment, Bumblepaw hesitated, her gaze darting between the shell and the stream.

One shell won't hurt...

She crept toward it, careful not to disturb the muddy ground. Just as she reached out to scoop it up, a scent hit her nose– unmistakably GlacierClan. Her ears twitched, and she froze.

Her gaze snapped toward the border, where the reeds shifted. A sleek, white-flecked black tom emerged from the undergrowth, his sharp indigo eyes locking onto her. Bumblepaw's fur bristled.

"Condorstrike," she muttered under her breath.

The GlacierClan warrior padded closer, his posture calm but commanding. "Fishing near the border, NightClan?" he called, his voice smooth but edged with warning.

"I'm on NightClan territory," Bumblepaw shot back, straightening her posture. "And I'm well within my rights to hunt here."

Condorstrike's gaze flicked to the shell near her paw. "That depends. Are you hunting for prey or collecting trinkets?"

Heat rushed to Bumblepaw's face. She stepped over the shell, shielding it from view. "What I'm doing is none of your business."

A black she-cat appeared behind Condorstrike, her eyes narrowing as she sniffed the air. "Your Clan's floodwaters are creeping into our hunting grounds. You're lucky we don't consider this trespassing."

Bumblepaw's tail bristled. "It's not our fault the rivers are rising. If anything, it's harder for us to hunt now, too."

Condorstrike's gaze lingered on her for a moment before he flicked his tail, signaling for his patrol to fall back. "Watch yourself, NightClan. Borders are easier to cross than you think."

Bumblepaw watched them retreat, her heart pounding. She let out a slow breath, her claws digging into the soft earth. As the reeds stilled and the GlaicerClan scent faded, she turned back to her pile of prey– and the gleaming shell.

She scooped it up carefully, her earlier frustration forgotten. Despite the tension with Condorstrike, she couldn't help but feel a small spark of triumph.

One more shell for Larkshell. And proof that I can handle anything the marsh throws at me.

*****

The camp buzzed with evening activity when Bumblepaw returned, her jaws laden with prey. The setting sun cast long shadows over the sandy shores, and the soft murmur of flowing water filled the air. Bumblepaw's shoulder ached, but she held her head high, determined to ignore the lingering sting of her encounter with Condorstrike.

As she approached the fresh-kill pile, Snailpaw and Gorsepaw were

already there, sorting through their catches with exaggerated pride. Snailpaw turned, spotting Bumblepaw. A smirk tugged at his lips.

"Look who finally decided to come back," he called, loud enough for half the camp to hear.

Gorsepaw's ears perked up, and his gaze dropped to the fish dangling from Bumblepaw's jaws. "Not bad... for a magpie."

Bumblepaw resisted the urge to snap back, instead dropping her prey onto the pile with a solid *thud.* The trout and two smaller fish gleamed in the fading light.

"Three catches," she said evenly, meeting Snailpaw's smug gaze. "How about you?"

Snailpaw puffed out his chest, stepping aside to reveal their haul– a single water vole and a fish that looked suspiciously small.

Gorsepaw quickly jumped in, his tail flicking. "Quality over quantity, right?"

"Is that what you tell yourself when you can't keep up?" Bumblepaw shot back, her voice sharper than she intended.

Snailpaw's fur bristled, and he took a step closer, his amber eyes narrowing. "Watch it, magpie. You wouldn't even have those if Hornetstorm weren't so soft on you. You spend more time chasing shiny rocks than prey."

Bumblepaw felt heat rising in her chest, anger bubbling beneath the surface. "And yet I still caught more than you. What's your excuse?"

A low growl escaped Snailpaw's throat, but before he could retort, a new voice cut through the tension.

"Enough, all of you," Hornetstorm barked, padding over with his tail raised high. His stern gaze swept over the apprentices, lingering on Bumblepaw.

Bumblepaw's ears flattened, but she stood her ground. "I wasn't the one who started it," she muttered.

Hornetstorm sighed, his expression softening slightly. "Bumblepaw, you're better than this. Don't let their words get under your fur."

Snailpaw and Gorsepaw exchanged glances, clearly irked by the tom's favortism, but they didn't argue.

Bumblepaw clenched her jaw, her claws flexing against the ground. "I'm not letting them get to me. I'm just proving that I can pull my weight."

"You don't need to prove anything," Hornetstorm said firmly. "Your catches speak for themselves. Let your actions do the talking."

The tension in Bumblepaw's chest eased slightly, and she dipped her head. "Yes, Hornetstorm."

"Good," he said before turning to Snailpaw and Gorsepaw. "As for you two, if you've got time to stir up trouble, you've got time to reinforce the nursery wall. Get to it."

The pair groaned but didn't argue, slinking off toward the nursery with their tails dragging.

Bumblepaw let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. She turned to Hornetstorm. "Thank you," she said quietly.

Hornetstorm gave her a small nod, his stern expression softening. "Don't thank me. Just focus on being the best warrior you can be. That'll shut them up faster than any argument."

As he padded away, Bumblepaw picked up the shell she'd tucked into her fur and headed for the medicine den. The soft light spilling from the entrance was a welcome sight, and she stepped inside to find Larkshell sorting herbs.

The black-and-white she-cat glanced up, her ears flicking as she recognized Bumblepaw. "You're late," Larkshell said bluntly, though her tone lacked malice.

Bumblepaw grinned, setting the shell carefully at Larshell's paws. "I brought you something."

Larkshell's eyes widened slightly as she studied the shell, turning it over with a paw. It shimmered in the dim light, its edges smooth and pearly.

"It's perfect," Larkshell said softly, her usual bluntness giving way to something warmer. She met Bumblepaw's gaze and added, "Thank you."

Bumblepaw's chest swelled with pride, the sting of Snailpaw and Gorsepaw's words fading into the background. "I'm glad you like it. I had to deal with a GlacierClan patrol to get it, so it better be worth it."

Larkshell's ears twitched, her expression sharpening. "A GlacierClan patrol? Near the border?"

"Yeah," Bumblepaw said, her tail flicking. "Condorstrike and some black she-cat. They weren't happy about the floodwaters creeping onto their side."

Larkshell frowned, her paw brushing over the shell. "Floodwaters shifting borders... that's not good. Maplestar will want to know about this."

Bumblepaw nodded, the weight of the day settling over her again. "I'll tell her tomorrow. Right now, I just want to rest."

Larkshell's gaze softened. "You did well today. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

Bumblepaw offered a small smile, her heart lighter as she turned to leave. The shell gleamed in the soft light, a reminder that, no matter what others thought, she had her own way of shining.

Chapter 5

[image]

Mudpaw padded alongside Topazshine, his fur prickling with a mix of anticipation and dread. The patrol moved in a tight line, their paws silent against the damp forest floor as they approached the flooded lands. The air was thick with the metallic scent of water and mud, and the occasional splash of disturbed fish sent ripples echoing through the stillness.

Elkstep, a dark gray tabby tom who was leading the patrol, cast a glance over his shoulder. His large frame made him appear unshakable, but even he carried a cautious tension. "Keep your eyes sharp and your ears open," he warned. "We're not here to fight, just to observe."

Silverwing, her tri-colored pelt gleaming despite the overcast skies, flicked her tail. "The sooner we figure out what's causing all this, the sooner we can stop looking over our shoulders for some water beast."

Raccoonpelt, always the optimist, added, "Maybe it's already moved on. No need to stick around a place like this if the prey's all gone."

Mudpaw forced a grin, but his stomach churned. He glanced at Topazshine, who offered him a reassuring nod. "Just stay close," she murmured. "We'll be fine."

The patrol reached the edge of the waters. Stagnant pools stretched before them, punctuated by the eerie silence of the floodlands. Mudpaw's heart thudded as he scanned the murky surface, looking for the glint of scales or the ripple of movement.

Elkstep raised his tail, signaling a halt. "This is close enough," he said. "Spread out, but stay within sight of each other. Look for tracks, signs of where it's been."

Mudpaw obeyed, his paws squelching in the damp earth as he crept

closer to the water's edge. The thought of the caiman lurking beneath the surface made his fur stand on end. He crouched low, examining the mud for any indentations, claw marks, anything that would hint of the predator's presence.

A sharp intake of breath from Silverwing made him whip his head around. "Here," she whispered, pointing with her tail to a set of deep gouges in the mud, leading directly into the water. "It's been here recently."

Elkstep padded over, his eyes narrowing. "Fresh," he confirmed. "We're in its territory."

Before anyone could react, the water exploded.

The caiman's massive jaws clamped down on Silverwing's hind leg, dragging her toward the water with terrifying force. Her scream shattered the silence, a sound that made Mudpaw's blood turn to ice.

"Elkstep!" Topazshine shouted, her claws unsheathing as she darted forward.

Elkstep was already there, a blur of fur and fury. He leaped onto the caiman's back, his powerful claws raking across its scaled hide. "Let her go!" he roared, sinking his teeth into its neck.

The caiman thrashed, its tail sending waves crashing over the patrol. It released Silverwing's leg, and she collapsed onto the bank, blood pooling beneath her.

"Silverwing!" Raccoonpelt cried, dragging her further from the water. Mudpaw rushed to help, his paws slipping in the mud as he tried to support her weight.

"Elkstep, get out of there!" Topazshine yelled.

But Elkstep couldn't hear. The caiman turned with terrifying speed, its jaws snapping around his throat. Time seemed to freeze as the older warrior's eyes met Mudpaw's. There was no fear, only a desperate, unspoken command: *Run.*

"No!" Mudpaw screamed, his voice breaking. He lunged forward, but Topazshine grabbed him by the scruff, yanking him back.

"We have to go!" she hissed, her voice shaking.

The caiman dragged Elkstep into the water, the ripples spreading outward like a cruel mockery of the warrior's sacrifice. Mudpaw's legs felt like stone, his chest heaving with sobs as the murky water swallowed Elkstep whole.

Raccoonpelt and Topazshine hauled Silverwing to her paws. "Move!" Raccoonpelt shouted, his usual cheer gone, replaced by grim determination.

Mudpaw stumbled after them, his mind a blur of grief and guilt. Every splash of water, every shift of the underbrush felt like the caiman's shadow looming behind them.

When they finally safer ground, Silverwing collapsed, her breaths shallow and uneven. Topazshine pressed her paw to the mangled remains of Silverwing's leg, her voice firm despite the tremor in it. "She needs to get back to camp now. Mudpaw, help me lift her."

Mudpaw didn't argue. He ducked under Silverwing's side, his muscles straining as he helped support her weight. His heart ached, each step away from the floodlands a reminder of Elkstep's final moment.

The patrol moved as quickly as they could, their silence heavy with the loss. Only the sound of Silverwing's labored breathing and Mudpaw's barely-contained sobs broket he stillness.

"Elkstep..." Mudpaw finally whispered, his voice trembling.

Topazshine glanced at him, her eyes filled with grief. "He was a hero, Mudpaw. We'll tell his story, but right now, we have to save Silverwing."

Mudpaw nodded, though the ache in his chest didn't lessen. As the camp came into view, the apprentice made a silent vow: Elkstep's sacrifice wouldn't be forgotten, and neither would be the danger that still lurked in the floodlands.

*****

The patrol's arrival in camp was anything but quiet. Mudpaw and Topazshine stumbled in first, Silverwing between them, her once-sleek tortoiseshell fur now matted with mud and blood. Raccoonpelt followed closely, his tail lashing as he glanced back toward the forest, as if the caiman might be following them.

"Help!" Topazshine's voice rang out, sharp and commanding. "We need medicine cats, now!"

Cats began merging from dens, their curious murmurs rising into a worried cacophony as they took in the state of the patrol. Hailfrost, Mudpaw's mother, was the first to rush over, her eyes wide with alarm.

"Mudpaw, what happened?" she demanded, pressing close to her son.

Mudpaw didn't answer; his throat was too tight, his mind replaying the moment Elkstep disappeared beneath the water.

Amberheart, the deputy, was quick to intervene. "Clear the way!" she ordered, her voice cutting through the growing crowd. "Let them get to the medicine den!"

Wildwing appeared at Hailfrost's side, his green eyes narrowing. "Where's Elkstep?" he asked, his voice low but urgent.

Topazshine's ears flattened, and she avoided meeting his gaze. "He... didn't make it."

Gasps rippled through the gathered cats. Hailfrost's tail twitched as she pressed closer to Mudpaw, her body a barrier against the wave of emotions threatening to crash over him.

"Medicine cats, now!" Topazshine repeated, her voice almost a growl.

Lilyrose and Blackberrythorn, the Clan's healers, darted out of their den. Blackberrythorn immediately began inspecting Silverwing's leg, her sharp intake of breath making it clear the injury was

severe.

"She's losing too much blood," Blackberrythorn said urgently. "We'll need to amputate."

Silverwing let out a weak groan, her eyes half-lidded but flickering with panic. "Do whatever you have to," she rasped.

Lilyrose nodded grimly. "Get her inside. Topazshine, Raccoonpelt, help us move her."

Mudpaw tried to follow, but Hailfrost blocked his path. "Mudpaw, you're trembling. Sit down and tell me what happened," she said, her voice gentle but firm.

"I–" His voice cracked. He felt the weight of every eye in the clearing on him, their gazes heavy with concern and curiosity.

Swiftstar emerged from his den, his hazel eyes sharp and unyielding. He leaped onto the High Tree, his commanding presence silencing the Clan's murmurs.

"Topazshine, Raccoonpelt," he called. "Once Silverwing is stable, I want a full report."

Topazshine paused, glancing back at Mudpaw before nodding. "Yes, Swiftstar."

Raccoonpelt dipped his head but said nothing, his expression unusually grim.

Swifstar's gaze shifted to Mudpaw. "And you, Mudpaw. You look shaken but unhurt. Are you capable of speaking now, or do you need time?"

Mudpaw swallowed hard, his voice barely above a whisper. "The caiman... it attacked us. Silverwing... Elkstep..."

Hailfrost nudged him gently. "Take a deep breath, sweetheart," she murmured. "You don't have to say everything at once."

Mudpaw sucked in a shaky breath and tried again. "The caiman

attacked when we got too close to the water. It bit Silverwing first. Elkstep tried to save her, but then..." His voice broke, and he shook his head, tears pricking his eyes.

"He was taken," Topazshine finished for him, her voice tight with emotion. She had returned to the clearing after ensuring Silverwing was settled in the medicine den. "Elkstep fought valiantly, but the caiman dragged him into the water."

The Clan erupted into chaos.

"Elkstep's gone?"

"We can't live like this! The floodlands are too dangerous!"

What about the camp? Could the caiman come here?"

Swifstar raised his tail for silence, his expression stony. "Enough!" he barked, his voice cutting through the air.

The clearing fell quiet, save for the rustling of the trees and the soft cries of those mourning Elkstep.

"This is a grave loss," Swifstar said, his voice firm but laced with sorrow. "Elkstep was a loyal warrior, and his sacrifice will not be forgotten. But we cannot let grief paralyze us. The floodwaters have brought danger into our territory, and we must find a way to protect ourselves and our Clanmates."

Amberheart stepped forward, her expression resolute. "We should organize patrols to monitor the floodlands and keep the caiman from straying closer to camp."

Swiftstar nodded. "Agreed. Topazshine, Raccoonpelt, and Amberheart, I want you to lead these patrols. Mudpaw, you'll stay in camp for now."

Mudpaw's ears flattened. "But I can help!" he protested, his voice cracking.

Hailfrost gently laid her tail across his shoulders. "You've been

through enough today," she said softly.

Swifstar's gaze softened slightly as he looked at Mudpaw. "Your bravery is noted, Mudpaw, but we need you to be strong and steady for what lies ahead. Take the time you need to recover."

Mudpaw reluctantly nodded, his heart heavy. As the Clan began to disperse, murmuring about Elkstep and the growing danger, he sat down beside Hailfrost.

For the first time since the patrol, he allowed himself to grieve, his tears falling silently into the mud. Elkstep was gone, and the caiman was still out there.

Chapter 6

The soft gurgle of the stream filled Bumblepaw's ears as she crouched low by the water's edge. The morning sun cast dappled light through the trees, the beams dancing on the water's surface. Her yellow eyes tracked the silver flash of a fish darting just beneath the ripples. Every muscle in her body was taut with focus.

The fish slowed its path, pausing just within reach. Bumblepaw's tail tip twitched once. With a precise flick of her paw, water splashed, sending the fish hurtling through the air. It landed on the bank with a wet slap, flopping desperately in the mud.

Bumblepaw pounced, her claws pinning the slippery creature. She delivered a quick bite, feeling a surge of triumph as its struggling ceased.

"Gotcha!" she whispered, the word puffing out in a small huff. She straightened and added the fish to her growing pile: two minnows and a plump vole she'd snagged earlier from the undergrowth.

Fishing always brought Bumblepaw a strange sense of peace. The rhythmic movement of the water, the quiet of the marshlands– it felt like home. Yet today, something felt off. A prickling unease crawled along her spine, and her ears flicked nervously.

She scanned the dense undergrowth across the stream. At first, all she saw was the gentle sway of brambles in the breeze. Then, a flash of white caught her eye– a fleeting glimpse of fur among the shadows.

Bumblepaw stiffened. Her fur bristled as she rose to her paws. "Who's there?" she called, her voice sharp.

The bushes rustled. A black-and-white cat emerged from the thicket, their sleek pelt marked with striking patches of white. Their purple eyes locked on hers, unwavering and calm.

A GlacierClan warrior.

Bumblepaw's claws unsheathed instinctively. GlacierClan cats weren't supposed to be this far south. The streams on this side of the territory were firmly NightClan's.

"What are you doing here?" Bumblepaw demanded, trying to keep her voice steady despite her racing heartbeat.

The GlacierClan cat didn't respond. Instead, they tilted their head, gesturing with a paw toward the stream and then toward a shaded area farther upstream.

Bumblepaw's tail lashed. "Answer me!" she snapped, frustration mingling with confusion. But the GlacierClan warrior simply turned and melted back into the brush, their movements as fluid as a shadow.

Her paws itched to chase after them, but logic stopped her. GlacierClan territory was hostile and unfamiliar. If she followed, she'd be outnumbered in a heartbeat.

Still, curiosity gnawed at her. The cat had pointed her toward something upstream. What could it be?

Against her better judgement, Bumblepaw padded cautiously toward the spot they'd indicated. The shaded pool they had motioned to was tucked between two large oaks, their sprawling roots forming a natural barrier around the water. Here, the stream widened and slowed, the surface glassy and calm.

Bumblepaw crouched beside the water. She dipped a paw in, marveling at how cool and still it felt compared to the rushing current downstream. Small fish darted lazily through the shadows, their movements unhurried and graceful.

She didn't have to wait long. Within moments, she scooped out a fish, then another. The pool seemed teeming with life, far more abundant than her usual spots.

Her pile of fresh-kill grew steadily, and she couldn't help but feel a flicker of gratitude toward the mysterious GlacierClan cat.

"Why would they help me?" she muttered under her breath, her gaze drifting toward the trees where the stranger had vanished.

By the time Bumblepaw returned to camp, her jaws were stretched to capacity carrying her haul. As she approached the fresh-kill pile, cats turned to stare, their eyes widening in surprise at the bounty she had brought back.

"Bumblepaw!" Hornetstorm's voice rang out as her mentor strode over. His blue-green eyes scanned the pile, a rare smile softening his stern expression. "Impressive catch. You've been busy."

Bumblepaw set the prey down, licking her lips. "The fish were practically jumping into my paws today," she said, forcing a light tone.

Hornetstorm narrowed his eyes slightly, his sharp gaze studying her. "You seem distracted. Something happen out there?"

Her heart skipped a beat. For a moment, she considered telling him about the GlacierClan cat. But the words caught in her throat. She wasn't even sure what she had seen or why it had happened.

"No," she said quickly. "Just... got lucky, I guess."

Hornetstorm grunted, clearly unconvinced, but he didn't press the issue. "Well, luck or skill, the Clan will appreciate it. Keep it up."

As her mentor walked away, Bumblepaw let out a shaky breath. She glanced toward the apprentice's den, her thoughts churning.

She'd have to tell Larkshell about this later. If anyone could help her make sense of the strange encounter, it was her closest friend.

But for now, as she looked at the curious stares of her Clanmates, she couldn't shake the feeling that this was just the beginning of something larger.

*****

Bumblepaw was basking in the fading sunlight near the apprentice's den, her belly full after a satisfying meal. She felt a rare sense of

accomplishment after her unusual fishing trip earlier. Across camp, Larkshell sorted herbs near the medicine den, and Bumblepaw considered telling her about the GlacierClan warrior she'd encountered. Before she could decide, a panicked yowl tore through the camp.

"Help! Someone help!"

All heads turned toward the camp entrance as Brindlepaw, Snailpaw and Gorsepaw's sister, staggered into camp. Her tortoiseshell fur was slicked with blood, and her left flank bore three deep gashes. She was panting heavily, her eyes wide with terror.

Bumblepaw scrambled to her paws, her heart leaping into her throat. "Brindlepaw!" she cried, rushing to her side.

Larkshell darted forward with a bundle of cobwebs already clutched in her jaws. "Lay her down carefully!" she ordered, her usual calm demeanor snapping into sharp focus.

Brindlepaw collapsed onto the sandy ground, gasping. "I–I didn't see it coming! It was so fast– so big!"

"What happened?" Maplestar's commanding voice cut through the rising commotion. The leader emerged from her den, her tortoiseshell-and-white fur bristling with alarm. Yellow eyes locked on Brindlepaw as the injured apprentice struggled to speak.

"I... I was in the stream," Brindlepaw stammered, trembling. "I thought I saw prey– something moving in the water. But then... claws. Teeth. It... it wasn't a cat!"

Murmurs rippled through the gathered warriors. "Not a cat?" hissed Snowtrail, Brindlepaw's mentor. "What else would it be?"

Maplestar's tail lashed, silencing the camp. "Let her speak."

Brindlepaw gulped, wincing as Larkshell pressed cobwebs against her wounds. "It smelled strange... and there was this... this growling sound. I barely got away. It slashed me before I could even turn around." Her voice broke, and he buried her face in her paws.

Bumblepaw's blood ran cold. Something dangerous in the water? Something that isn't a cat? A shiver ran through her body as she stared wide-eyed at the wounded Brindlepaw.

Larkshell's voice broke through her thoughts. "These aren't ordinary claw marks," she said, frowning as she inspected Brindlepaw's injuries. "They're wider... and deeper. Too big for a cat."

"Could it have been GlacierClan?" asked Streamflow, his eyes narrowed.

Brindlepaw shook her head fervently. "No! It wasn't GlacierClan. It wasn't a cat at all!"

The camp fell into uneasy silence. Maplestar's gaze swept over her Clanmates, her expression grim. "We'll need to send a patrol to investigate the stream. Whatever attacked Brindlepaw might still be out there."

Bumblepaw hesitated, the image of whatever creature attacking a lone cat haunting her mind. Then, she thought about the GlacierClan warrior she'd seen. Did they know about the threat in the water? Should she bring up the encounter now?

Before she could decide, Larkshell caught her eye. The medicine cat apprentice's gaze was steady but questioning, as if she already knew Bumblepaw was holding something back.

"I'll go," Hornetstorm volunteered, stepping foward. The strict tom's voice carried a steely determination. "If there's something lurking in our territory, we need to deal with it before it threatens the entire Clan."

Maplestar nodded. "Take a strong patrol and move quickly. But be cautious. We can't afford any more injuries."

As the warriors began assembling, Bumblepaw slipped closer to Larkshell. Her voice was barely above a whisper. "Larkshell, I... I think I know something about this."

Larkshell's ear twitched, and she turned to face Bumblepaw fully. "What do you mean?"

"It's just... earlier, at the stream... I met someone," Bumblepaw confessed, her heart pounding. "A GlacierClan cat. They didn't say anything, but pointed me upstream while I was fishing. Do you think they knew what was in the water?"

Larkshell's eyes narrowed, her mind already racing. "We can't jump to conclusions," she said firmly. "But if they knew something, we have to figure out what. For now, don't say anything to Maplestar. Let's see what the patrol finds first."

Bumblepaw nodded, though her chest tightened with unease. As the patrol disappeared into the fading light, she couldn't shake the feeling that whatever lurked in the water was far more dangerous than any of them had imagined.

Chapter 7

[image]

Mudpaw lingered near the edge of camp, his tail curled tightly around himself. The whispers were everywhere– low murmurs from warriors sharing tongues, elders huddled close as if the very words they spoke could shatter the air.

The one thing he hadn't expected was to hear the voices of his littermates.

"It's not his fault," Eveningpaw said, her voice hushed but carrying just enough to reach Mudpaw's twitching ears.

"But how could he have missed it?" Snippaw pressed, his tone edged with frustration. "He's the one who saw the caiman when it first got here. The whole patrol could've died! Elkstep *did* die."

Eveningpaw's response came after a long pause. "You weren't there, Snippaw. You didn't see what it was like. Mudpaw probably did everything he could."

"Did he, though?" Snippaw countered. "What if he froze? What if he–"

"Snippaw, stop!" Eveningpaw hissed, her voice trembling now. "You're talking about our brother!"

Mudpaw's breath hitched. He wanted to march over and defend himself, but his paws felt heavy like they were stuck in the mud. Shame and anger churned in his chest, he felt the sharp sting of doubt. What if Snippaw was right?

A familiar voice broke through his spiraling thoughts. "Mudpaw."

He turned sharply to see Raccoonpelt, his uncle, standing a few tail-lengths away. The older tom's blue eyes were calm but held an intensity that made Mudpaw's fur prickle.

"Come with me," Raccoonpelt said, nodding toward a quieter corner of camp.

Reluctantly, Mudpaw followed, his ears burning as he passed the other cats. The weight of their stares felt like stones pressing on his back. The gazes that hurt the most were his siblings– Eveningpaw looked horrified as she realized he heard them, and Snippaw avoiding his eyes with shame prickling his pelt.

When they reached a secluded spot near the dirtplace tunnel, Raccoonpelt sat down, his tail curling around his paws. "You've been hearing things," he started, his tone gentle but firm.

Mudpaw stared at his paws. "They think it's my fault," he muttered, his voice barely above a whisper. "Even Snippaw does."

Raccoonpelt let out a slow breath. "Cats say a lot of things when they're scared or grieving. But what happened out there wasn't on you, Mudpaw. If anything, you saved Silveriwng's life by shouting when you did."

"But I didn't see the caiman first," Mudpaw said, his voice cracking. "I didn't shout... it surprised us all. I didn't do enough– Elkstep's gone because of me."

"Stop," Raccoonpelt said firmly, his blue eyes locking onto Mudpaw's. "Elkstep knew the risks. We all did. He fought to protect his Clan, and you did, too. No one is blaming you– not the cats who matter, anyway."

Mudpaw blinked rapidly, fighting back the tears that stung his eyes. "Then why does it feel like they are?"

Before Raccoonpelt could respond, Rainsweptfire padded over, her usually isolated demeanor seeming subdued. The tabby she-cat glanced at Raccoonpelt, who nodded slightly, before sitting beside Mudpaw.

"I heard what happened," Rainsweptfire said softly. "Mudpaw, Elkstep was my brother. He was more of a father to me than an older brother, and I know he wouldn't want you carrying this

weight."

Mudpaw looked up at her, his voice trembling. "But what if I could've done more? What if–"

Rainsweptfire rested her tail lightly on his shoulder. "Elkstep trusted you. If he thought you weren't doing enough, he wouldn't have risked his life like he did. He acted because he believed in his Clanmates– because he believed in *you*."

Mudpaw swallowed hard, his heart twisting at her words. He wanted to believe them, but the doubt still lingered like a shadow.

"You're young," Raccoonpelt added, his voice steady. "And this was a hard lesson to learn. But don't let their whispers define you, Mudpaw. Let what you *do* from here on out speak for itself."

Mudpaw nodded slowly, the lump in his throat making it hard to speak. "I'll try," he managed, his voice barely audible.

"That's all anyone can ask," Rainsweptfire said gently.

As the two warriors left him to his thoughts, Mudpaw sat alone, staring up at the darkening sky. The dark clouds covered the stars, the promise of rain evident. A small ember of determination flickered in his heart as the words of the two warriors sank in. If he couldn't change the past, he'd make sure Elkstep's sacrifice wasn't in vain.

*****

Mudpaw padded toward the apprentice den, his tail dragging across the damp earth. The sun had dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows across the camp, but the soft hum of life persisted around him. He just wanted to sleep and shut out the stares and whispers that followed him like a shadow.

As he neared the den, voices reached his ears– familiar ones.

"I just don't understand how Mudpaw didn't see it coming," Snippaw muttered, his voice sharp with frustration. "He's the one who claimed he saw the caiman first. How could it surprise them again?"

"Snippaw," Eveningpaw said softly, "you're being unfair. You know Mudpaw wouldn't put anyone in danger on purpose."

"But Elkstep is dead!" Snippaw snapped. "And Silverwing is going to lose her leg! Someone has to take responsibility."

Mudpaw froze just outside the den, his heart pounding. He pressed himself against the wall of brambles, his breath shallow as he listened.

"Blaming Mudpaw isn't going to change anything," Eveningpaw said, her tone pleading. "He's our brother. Don't you think he feels terrible enough already?"

"Maybe he should have thought about that before leading the patrol too close to the water," Snippaw muttered, his words like claws raking across Mudpaw's chest.

Unable to bear it any longer, Mudpaw turned and padded away, his steps heavy and uneven. His ears burned with anger and shame, but beneath it all, a deep sadness coiled in his chest.

He didn't know where he was going until he almost bumped into Raccoonpelt. The older warrior blinked down at him, his blue eyes narrowing slightly.

"Mudpaw," he said, his voice calm but firm. "Are you okay?"

Mudpaw hesitated, his paws itched to run, but Raccoonpelt's steady gaze rooted him in place.

"They're talking about me," he mumbled, lowering his head as shame washed over him.

"Who?"

"My siblings."

Raccoonpelt's expression softened. "It's easier to point paws than to face grief, Mudpaw. But you can't control what they say. What you can control is how you carry on. Show them who you are through your actions. The truth will speak louder than their words."

Mudpaw nodded slowly, the weight in his chest easing just a little.

"Now," Raccoonpelt said, standing and brushing his tail against Mudpaw's flank, "get some rest. Tomorrow's a new day, and we'll need your strength."

As Mudpaw padded back toward the den, Rainsweptfire intercepted him near the center of camp.

"Mudpaw," she said, her voice warm and concerned. "Are you okay?"

He hesitated before nodding. "I'm doing my best."

Rainsweptfire touched her nose to his ear. "That's all anyone can ask. If you ever need to talk, I'll be here."

"Thanks, Rainsweptfire," Mudpaw murmured.

When he finally curled up in his nest that night, Snippaw's words still echoed in his mind, but so did Raccoonpelt's. *Show them who you are. The truth will speak louder than their words.*

For the first time since Elkstep's death, Mudpaw felt a spark of determination stir in his chest.

Chapter 8

The rain was a relentless, pounding rhythm that drowned out nearly all other sounds in the camp. Bumblepaw huddled beneath a makeshift overhang of brambles near the apprentices' den, the shelter doing little to keep her dry. Rain streamed off the edges, pooling at her paws, and her ginger-and-white tabby fur clung to her sides, slick and heavy. She swished her tail irritably, sending droplets flying, but the effort did little to lift her spirits.

All around her, the camp was in chaos. Warriors darted from den to den, barking orders and hauling sodden moss to patch up leaks. The other apprentices scurried underfoot, slipping in the mud as they scrambled to help reinforce the camp's barriers. The storm had swollen the rivers surrounding their camp, and everyone seemed on edge, as if one more surge of water could sweep them all away.

Bumblepaw's ears twitched at the sharp voice of Hornetstorm cutting through the downpour. "Bumblepaw! Stop hiding under there and make yourself useful!"

She glanced up, irritation flickering in her yellow eyes. Hornetstorm stood at the center of the clearing, his dark red tabby fur plastered flat by the rain. His sharp blue-green eyes found hers, and his tail lashed impatiently.

"I wasn't hiding," Bumblepaw muttered under her breath, her voice drowned out by the storm's roar. Still, she rose to her paws and gave her drenched fur a futile shake before bounding into the rain. The cold water soaked her even further, but she forced herself not to shiver.

Hornetstorm met her halfway, flicking his tail toward a pile of moss by the elders' den. "That moss isn't going to move itself. Get to it."

"I'm going," Bumblepaw grumbled but darted toward the pile as he turned away to bark orders at Snailpaw. Her paws sank into the mud with every step, sucking at her with a sticky grip.

As she reached the moss, she heard a frustrated hiss to her left. Turning her head, she spotted Larkshell near the medicine den, fumbling with a patch of brambles that had come loose from the storm. Bumblepaw felt a pang of guilt at seeing her friend struggling alone.

"Need help, Larkshell?" she called, her voice straining to rise above the wind and rain.

Larkshell didn't look up right away, focusing on weaving the brambles back into place. "I'll manage," she replied, her voice blunt but not unkind. Her paws moved with precision, though her fur bristled with annoyance.

Bumblepaw hesitated before grabbing a clump of moss in her jaws. "I'll come back after I'm done with this!" she promised, her words muffled by the soggy material.

"Don't make promises you can't keep," Larkshell replied, finally meeting Bumblepaw's gaze. Though her words were sharp, there was a flicker of warmth in her purple eyes. "You've got your own tasks, remember?"

With a flick of her tail, Bumblepaw turned and hauled the moss toward the warriors' den. Her legs ached as she trudged through the muck, and her ears flattened against the constant battering of the rain. Warriors darted past her, their eyes hard with focus as they worked to shore up the camp's defenses.

As Bumblepaw reached the den, she caught fragments of conversation from nearby.

"It's unnatural," Snowtrail muttered, his fur spiked with rainwater. His voice was low but carried an edge of unease. "Like the river's alive, fighting back against us."

"You think it's just the storm?" Swanwish replied, though her voice wavered with uncertainty.

Bumblepaw froze, her paws buried in the mud. She tilted her head slightly, ears straining to catch more. *The river's alive? What are they*

talking about?

"I don't know," Snowtrail admitted. "But it's not normal. The current's stronger than I've ever seen it, and something about the water feels... wrong."

Swanwish shook her head, her eyes narrowing. "We should focus on reinforcing the camp. Leave the superstitions to the elders."

Bumblepaw's tail twitched uneasily as the warriors moved out of earshot. She shook herself, forcing her attention back to her task. "Probably just Snowtrail being dramatic again," she muttered under her breath. But even as she tried to dismiss it, her heart thudded faster.

Her mentor's voice cut through her thoughts. "What's taking so long, Bumblepaw?" Hornetstorm's sharp tone made her jump. He stood just outside the warriors' den, his gaze fixed on her with a mix of impatience and exasperation.

"Nothing! I'm coming!" Bumblepaw called back, grabbing the moss again. She trudged into the den, her paws heavy with mud and her mind even heavier with doubt.

*****

Rain lashed at Bumblepaw's fur as she crept along the flooded marshland, her paws sinking into the muddy ground with every step. The storm hadn't let up since she and Larkshell left camp, the water levels rising fast enough to make even the safest paths treacherous. Each rumble of thunder echoed like a growl from a predator, vibrating through her chest and adding to the unease already coiled there.

"I don't like this," Bumblepaw muttered, flicking water from her ears. She glanced at Larkshell, who was picking her way carefully through the muck, her tail raised high as if it were a guidepost.

"You've said that four times already," Larkshell replied, her voice steady but terse. "We're almost there. Just keep moving."

Bumblepaw didn't respond immediately. Her eyes flicked toward

the dark water pooling ahead. Something about it seemed... wrong. It wasn't just the way the surface rippled with every drop of rain or how it reflected the dim light of the stormy sky. There was something beneath it– shadows shifting too quickly to be the current.

A chill ran down her spine. "Do you see that?" she whispered, her voice barely audible over the rain.

Larkshell stopped, her sharp gaze following Bumblepaw's. "What am I looking for?"

Bumblepaw hesitated, her mouth dry despite the rain. "I don't know... something moved."

Larkshell narrowed her eyes, her claws flexing instinctively. "If you're trying to scare me, it's not going to work."

"I'm not!" Bumblepaw insisted, her fur bristling. "I swear, there's something–"

A sudden splash made them both freeze. It wasn't the sound of rain hitting the water but something larger, something alive. Bumblepaw's heart thudded in her chest as she instinctively backed away, her tail brushing against Larkshell.

"Stay calm," Larkshell said, though her voice had lost its usual even tone. "It's probably just a fish."

"Fish don't make noises like that," Bumblepaw countered, her ears flattening against her head.

Another splash, closer this time, sent both cats scrambling onto a nearby patch of elevated ground. The water rippled violently, and for a moment, Bumblepaw thought she saw a dark shape glide just beneath the surface– a shadow too large to be a fish and too deliberate in its movements to be debris.

Larkshell's eyes narrowed, her tail lashing. "Whatever it is, it's not friendly."

"What do we do?" Bumblepaw whispered, her voice trembling.

Larkshell didn't answer immediately. Her gaze swept the area, calculating. "We're not far from the island. If we run now–"

A guttural hiss rose from the water, cutting her off. Bumblepaw's breath hitched as the shape resurfaced, its massive, scaly body breaking through the water like a nightmare come to life. It was a caiman, its long snout filled with jagged teeth that gleamed even in the storm's dim light.

"Run!" Larkshell yowled, shoving Bumblepaw forward.

They bolted, their paws splashing through shallow pools and slick mud as the caiman lunged after them. Bumblepaw's heart pounded in her ears, the storm and the creature's guttural growls blurring into a cacophony of terror.

"Keep going!" Larkshell shouted behind her, but Bumblepaw couldn't look back. She could hear the caiman's heavy body crashing through the water, feel the tremors of its pursuit beneath her paws.

Ahead, a cluster of trees loomed like a beacon of safety. Bumblepaw's claws dug into the wet earth as she pushed herself harder, her lungs burning. She reached the nearest tree and leaped, scrambling onto the lower branches just as the caiman snapped its jaws where she'd been moments before.

"Larkshell!" Bumblepaw cried, turning to see her friend struggling to climb another tree. The caiman lunged again, its massive tail sending waves of water crashing against the trunks.

"Go!" Larkshell hissed, her claws sinking into the bark as she hauled herself higher. "Warn the Clan!"

"I'm not leaving you!" Bumblepaw yelled, her voice raw with panic.

Another snap of the caiman's jaws made the decision for her. Larkshell was out of reach for now, but the creature's cold, predatory eyes turned toward Bumblepaw.

"Go!" Larkshell repeated, her voice fierce.

Bumblepaw hesitated, every instinct screaming at her to stay. But Larkshell's sharp glare cut through the chaos, but Bumblepaw forced herself to move, leaping from branch to branch until she reached the safety of solid ground.

"I'll come back!" she promised, her voice barely audible over the storm.

Larkshell didn't respond, her silhouette barely visible through the rain. Bumblepaw turned and ran, the storm swallowing her as she raced toward camp, her mind spinning with fear and determination.

Chapter 9

[image]

Mudpaw hesitated at the entrance to the medicine den, his paws rooted to the earth as if weighed down by stones. The soft hum of voices and the sharp scent of herbs floated out to meet him. Rain drummed against the camp, the heavy downpour muting the usual bustle.

He knew Silverwing was inside. He had seen Raccoonpelt helping her into the den days ago, her leg bloodied and limp, and it was all he could think about since... other than Snippaw's suspicion.

Taking a deep breath, Mudpaw stepped inside, his heart pounding in his chest. The warm scent of moss and herbs filled his nose as his eyes adjusted to the dim light. In the center of the den, Silverwing lay curled on her side, her injured leg now just a bandaged stump.

Her ears twitched as he approached, and she lifted her head, blue-green eyes softening when she saw him. "Mudpaw," she greeted, her voice warm but tired. "Come in."

"I, uh... brought you something to eat," Mudpaw stammered, nudging a fresh mouse forward with his paw.

Silverwing's whiskers twitched with gratitude. "That was thoughtful of you," she said, sitting up slowly, her movements deliberate and measured.

Mudpaw's gaze flickered toward her bandaged leg, and guilt twisted in his chest like a thorn. "I wanted to see how you were," he said, his voice quieter now. "Are you... okay?"

Silverwing took a moment before answering, her tail curling neatly over her good hind leg. "I'm alive," she said simply, her tone calm but tinged with an undercurrent of determination. "It feels strange, having one less limb. Like it's still there sometimes. But I'll adapt. Once I heal, I'll figure out how to hunt and fight again. I'm not

giving up that easily."

Mudpaw's ears flattened, and he looked away, his claws digging into the soft earth. "I'm sorry," he whispered, his voice cracking. "I'm so, so sorry. This is all my fault."

Silverwing tilted her head, her expression softening with concern. "Mudpaw..."

Tears welled in his eyes as he went on, his voice rising with emotion. "Elkstep is dead because of me. You're hurt because of me. If I'd been faster or– or smarter, none of this would've happened!"

"Mudpaw, stop," Silverwing said firmly, her tone cutting through his spiral. She leaned forward, her nose gently brushing his shoulder. "This isn't your fault."

"But it is!" Mudpaw protested, the tears spilling over now. "I should've done something– anything– to stop it! Elkstep saved you because I couldn't. He gave his life because I was too scared to act."

Silverwing's gaze grew serious, her voice steady and soothing. "Elkstep made his choice," she said. "He saw what was happening and didn't hesitate. That wasn't on you, Mudpaw. It was who he was. And the caiman? It surprised all of us. No one could've stopped it."

Mudpaw sniffed, his chest heaving with sobs. "But Snippaw says– he says it's my fault Elkstep's gone. He's right, isn't he? Everyone thinks it."

Silverwing's ears flattened briefly, but she shook her head. "Snippaw wasn't there," she said sharply. "He doesn't know what happened, and it's not his place to decide who's to blame. You were there, Mudpaw. You saw it. You did everything you could."

"I didn't do enough," Mudpaw murmured, his voice small.

Silverwing leaned back, her blue-green eyes locking onto his. "You helped me get home," she said softly. "If it weren't for you, I wouldn't be here right now. I wouldn't be alive to adapt to this." She gestured lightly to her missing leg. "You showed the Clan the

danger in our territory. That matters. That saved lives."

Mudpaw blinked, her words hitting him like a rush of cold water. "But Elkstep–"

"Elkstep would've been proud of you," Silverwing said, her voice thick with emotion. "He wouldn't want you to carry this guilt. He'd want you to be strong, to keep moving forward. You're not alone, Mudpaw. None of us are."

The young apprentice's tears slowed, though his chest still ached with the weight of grief. "I just... I miss him," he whispered.

"I miss him too," Silverwing said gently. "We all do. But the best way to honor him is to live the way he did– selflessly, bravely, with everything we've got."

Mudpaw nodded slowly, her words settling over him like a blanket of snow. "I'll try," he said, his voice still shaky but steadier than before.

"That's all anyone can ask," Silverwing replied with a faint smile.

They sat in silence for a long while, the steady patter of rain outside filling the space between them. For the first time in days, Mudpaw felt a flicker of hope amid the grief, a tiny ember of determination to keep moving forward.

*****

Mudpaw stepped out of the medicine den, Silverwing's words echoing in his ears. The rain had eased into a fine drizzle, but the camp was still drenched, the ground muddy and slick. Warriors moved with purpose, reinforcing dens and clearing the soggy debris the storm had left behind.

As he made his way to the apprentices' den, a sharp voice cut through the dmap air.

"Mudpaw!"

He froze, his ears flicking toward the source. Snippaw was stalking

toward him, his fur bristling and his eyes blazing with anger. Eveningpaw trailed behind, her expression tense, as if she were preparing for the worst.

"What do you want?" Mudpaw asked, his voice steady but tinged with weariness.

Snippaw didn't waste a moment. "I want to know how you can walk around camp like nothing happened," he snarled. "Elkstep is dead because of you, and Silverwing's in the medicine den with one less leg!"

Mudpaw stiffened, his claws sinking into the mud. "I didn't ask to lead that patrol into danger. I did everything I could–"

"Everything you could?" Snippaw interrupted, his tone dripping with sarcasm. "You think that's enough? Elkstep was a seasoned warrior, and now he's gone. And Silverwing– she'll never be the same!"

Eveningpaw stepped forward, her tail lashing. "Snippaw, stop it!" she snapped. "You're not being fair. Mudpaw didn't–"

"Stay out of this, Eveningpaw," Snippaw growled, his eyes never leaving Mudpaw. "He needs to hear this."

"No, *you* need to hear this," Mudpaw shot back, his voice steady but firm. "I didn't drag Elkstep into that water. I didn't ask the caiman to attack. I did what I could to save Silverwing and warn the Clan. If you think I wanted any of this, you're wrong."

Snippaw's eyes narrowed, his fur bristling even more. "You think that makes you a hero?" he spat. "You're just a reckless apprentice who got lucky."

"Lucky?" Mudpaw's voice cracked with disbelief. He took a step closer, his tail lashing. "Do you know what it's like to watch a warrior die? To see your mentor as terrified as you are but have to hide it? To feel like every step you take is weighed down by the blood of your clanmate? I don't *need* you to remind me– I live with it everyday."

Eveningpaw placed herself between them, her gaze pleading. "Snippaw, stop this. You're upset, we all are, but taking it out on Mudpaw won't change anything."

Snippaw hesitated, his claws flexing. "He should've done more," he muttered, but his voice lacked its earlier venom.

"There's nothing more I could've done," Mudpaw said, his voice quieter now but still firm. "Elkstep made his choice. Silverwing said as much, and she's the one who's actually living through this."

For a moment, Snippaw didn't reply. He just stared at Mudpaw, his anger dimming into something more conflicted. Finally, he shook his head and turned away.

"Believe what you want," he muttered over his shoulder. "But I know the truth."

Mudpaw watched him go, his chest heaving with unspoken words. Eveningpaw rested her tail on his shoulder, her gaze filled with sympathy.

"Don't let him get to you," she said softly. "He's hurting, just like you are. But he's wrong, Mudpaw. You're not to blame."

Mudpaw nodded slowly, though Snippaw's words still stung. "Thanks, Eveningpaw," he murmured.

She gave him a small smile before following Snippaw, leaving Mudpaw alone in the rain. He stood there for a long moment, staring at the muddy ground beneath his paws.

Finally, he lifted his head, Silverwing's voice ringing in his mind: *You're stronger than you know.*

If Snippaw wanted to doubt him, so be it. He would prove to his Clan– and to himself– that he wasn't defined by one tragedy.

With a deep breath, Mudpaw turned away from the apprentice's den, his resolve burning brighter than ever.

Chapter 10

Bumblepaw's breaths came in ragged gasps as she burst through the camp entrance, her ginger-and-white fur slick with rain and mud. The downpour muffled her panicked cries, but the urgency in her voice cut through the lifting storm.

"Help! Someone, please!" Her claws slipped in the mud, but she pushed forward, her eyes wide with terror. "Larkshell's in danger! There's a caiman!"

Heads turned sharply from the dens, warriors and apprentices blinking in alarm. Heronstripe, the deputy, was the first to approach, her white pelt bristling as she stepped into the rain.

"Bumblepaw," she said, her tone sharp but steady, "calm down and tell me what happened."

"I– I can't!" Bumblepaw stammered, her voice cracking. "We have to go now! It– it came out of the water and chased us! It cornered her, and– and I don't know what to do! She made me run!"

Heronstripe's mix-matched eyes narrowed, and she turned to the gathered warriors. "Serpentstrike, Hawthornsplash, Juniperfoot, with me. Bumblepaw, lead us there."

Hawthornsplash, shaking droplets from her calico-tabby fur, stepped forward hesitantly. "You said we're dealing with a... caiman? What's that? Some kind of fox or badger?"

"It's not either of those!" Bumblepaw snapped, her voice rising in frustration. "It was in the water– it was huge, with teeth like... claws! Please, we're wasting time!"

Heronstripe silenced the murmurs with a flick of her tail. "Enough questions. If Bumblepaw says Larkshell's in danger, we move now."

*****

The patrol plunged into the storm, rain hammering down and soaking their pelts as they sprinted through the muddy terrain. Bumblepaw led the way, her paws churning up waterlogged leaves and earth. Every gust of wind made the trees creak, the noise echoing like a warning in her ears.

"Are you sure we're going the right way?" Hawthornsplash shouted over the roar of the rain.

"Yes!" Bumblepaw shot back, her voice tight. "I know where it happened. Just follow me!"

The patrol skidded to a halt as they reached the spot where Larkshell had been. The shoreline was a mess of mud and water, the river's surface rippling ominously under the relentless rain. Bumblepaw's heart sank.

"She was right here!" Bumblepaw's voice broke, her tail lashing as she scanned the area. "I saw it turn back toward her– I don't think it grabbed her, b-but the rain was so loud..."

"Wait." Serpentstrike's nose twitched as he crouched, his paw pointing toward deep gouges in the mud near the water's edge. "Look at this. These marks... something heavy was dragged into the water."

Hawthornsplash sniffed at a clump of fur caught on a jagged rock. "This is Larkshell's," she said grimly. "There's no mistake."

Bumblepaw's legs trembled as she stared at the evidence, her ears flattening against her head. "No, no, no," she whispered, her voice barely audible. "She can't be gone."

Heronstripe moved beside her, her gaze locked on the turbulent water. "Whatever took her is still out there."

"We can't just give up!" Bumblepaw cried, her claws digging into the mud. "We have to find her!"

"And how do you propose we do that?" Heronstripe's voice was firm but strained. "If we go in after her now, we risk more lives."

"But she's one of us!" Bumblepaw snapped, her eyes blazing. "We can't just leave her!"

Hawthornsplash stepped closer, her expression pained. "Bumblepaw, I know it's hard, but Heronstripe is right. We don't know where this thing is or even if it's still nearby. If we're not careful, it could take another one of us."

Bumblepaw turned away, her chest heaving with suppressed sobs. Her nostrils flared as she breathed in the scent of churned mud and rain. The thought of leaving Larkshell behind gnawed at her like sharp teeth.

Juniperfoot broke the silence. "We should spread out, look for any signs further along the shore."

Heronstripe hesitated before nodding. "Quickly, but don't stray too far. Stay in pairs."

Bumblepaw and Hawthornsplash took one direction, while Heronstripe, Serpentstrike, and Juniperfoot took the other. Bumblepaw's splashed through the mud, her heart hammering with every step.

"She could still be alive," Bumblepaw muttered, her voice trembling. "She has to be."

Hawthornsplash didn't respond immediately. When she finally spoke, her voice was quiet. "I hope so, Bumblepaw. But we have to be ready for anything."

Minutes dragged on like hours, the rain growing heavier and washing away any faint traces of scent or tracks. Bumblepaw's frustration bubbled over.

"This is useless!" she shouted, her voice breaking. "The rain is ruining everything!"

Hawthornsplash placed her tail on Bumblepaw's shoulder. "We're not giving up. We'll find her, one way or another."

A sudden splash echoed through the storm, making both cats freeze.

Bumblepaw's fur stood on end as she turned toward the river, her breath catching.

"Did you hear that?" she whispered.

Hawthornsplash nodded, her ears swiveling. "Stay close."

They edged toward the sound, their eyes scanning the churning water. But as the moments stretched on and the rain blurred their vision, nothing emerged.

By the time the patrol regrouped, their expressions were heavy with defeat. Heronstripe's voice was low as she spoke. "The rain's washed away any chance of tracking her. We'll organize a search at dawn."

Bumblepaw's claws sank into the mud as her tail lashed furiously. "Dawn? She could be gone by then!"

"And if we push forward recklessly, more cats could be lost," Heronstripe said, her tone leaving no room for argument. "We'll do this right, Bumblepaw."

As the patrol began the somber trek back to camp, Bumblepaw cast one last glance at the water, her heart aching. Somewhere out there, Larkshell was alone, and Bumblepaw couldn't shake the feeling that she had failed her best friend.

Tomorrow, she thought bitterly, *we'll find her. We have to.*

*****

The camp was shrouded in an eerie stillness as Bumblepaw stumbled through the entrance, her paws heavy with mud and her fur plastered to her sides from the rain. The patrol trailed behind her, their faces grim and eyes downcast. She stopped in the center of camp, her heart pounding, and her voice broke into a desperate yowl.

"Larkshell's gone! The caiman– she needs help!"

Cats emerged from dens, their sleepy faces quickly twisting into confusion and fear. Maplestar leaped down from her den, Poolripple

following close behind.

"What do you mean, gone?" Maplestar demanded, her yellow eyes blazing.

Heronstripe stepped forward, her voice steadier. "We found no sign of her, only drag marks near the edge with some fur. The caiman– it must've taken her."

Gasps rippled through the gathering cats. Whispered questions and murmurs of disbelief filled the air. Bumblepaw shrank under their stares, her chest tightening.

"I tried to save her!" Bumblepaw's voice cracked as she looked at Maplestar. "I– I couldn't–"

Heronstripe placed her tail on her shoulder, silencing her stammering. "She did her best. The caiman surprised them. Larkshell's disappearance isn't her fault."

But the murmurs didn't stop. Gorsepaw's voice rose above the others, taunting and accusatory. "She was supposed to keep an eye on her patrolmate! If she hadn't let Larkshell get close to the water–"

"That's enough!" Heronstripe snapped, her fur bristling. "Bumblepaw risked her life to come back and warn us. Don't place blame where it doesn't belong."

Gorsepaw muttered something under his breath and turned away, but the damage was done. Bumblepaw felt the weight of the Clan's judgement pressing down on her as their gazes turned to her, wary and untrusting.

Maplestar bounded onto the Highledge, her voice cutting through the camp. "NightClan, gather beneath the Highledge! This is not a time for blame– it is a time for action."

Cats clustered together, their faces tense with worry. Bumblepaw hung back, her ears flat against her head, dreading what would be said next.

"We have a predator in our midst," Maplestar announced, her voice unwavering. "A creature unlike any we've faced before. It took Larkshell, and it may not stop there. Patrols will be doubled near the rivers, and no cat is to go near the water alone. Do you understand?"

A chorus of agreement rose from the crowd, but the tension didn't ease.

"Is it true it's some kind of giant lizard?" a warrior asked, his tail lashing.

Heronstripe nodded grimly. "Bumblepaw described it as a caiman; something with scales, sharp teeth, and a tail that can knock a cat off their paws. It's incredibly dangerous."

Murmurs of fear spread like wildfire. Bumblepaw kept her head low, unable to face the stares that were directed her way.

As the meeting ended, Heronstripe found Bumblepaw sitting alone near the apprentice's den, her tail wrapped tightly around her paws.

"You did the right thing, Bumblepaw," she said gently, sitting beside her.

"Did I?" Bumblepaw's voice was barely above a whisper. "Larkshell's gone because of me. If I had been faster–"

"Larkshell's disappearance is on the caiman, not you," Heronstripe interrupted firmly. "No cat could've seen this coming. And because of you, the Clan knows to stay vigilant. That will save lives."

Bumblepaw blinked back tears, her gaze fixed on the ground. "They still blame me. Even Gorsepaw– he thinks I should've done more."

Heronstripe sighed. "Cats will always look for someone to blame in times like this. Don't let their words shake you. What matters is what you do next. Larkshell wouldn't want you drowning in guilt. She'd want you to keep fighting– for her."

*****

That night, Bumblepaw couldn't sleep. Her restless paws carried her out of the apprentice's den and through the quiet camp. The moonlight filtered through the rain-soaked trees, casting eerie shadows on the ground.

Driven by a gnawing guilt and determination, she retraced her fleeing steps to the riverbank. The air was thick with the scent of water and mud. Bumblepaw's heart raced as she scanned the area, desperate for any sign of Larkshell.

Near a cluster of reeds, her gaze caught on something. She padded closer and froze. Drag marks crisscrossed the muddy ground, and a tuft of white fur was snagged on a thornbush. Her breath hitched as she crouched to sniff it– Larkshell's scent was faint but unmistakable.

The air carried another scen, too– sharp, metallic, and wrong. *Blood*. Bumblepaw's fur stood on end, her pulse thundering in her ears.

The caiman had been here recently, and with the proof of Larkshell's presence now within her sight, hope flared in her chest that she'd see her friend again. She just had to get the Clan to believe it.

*****

At dawn, Bumblepaw burst into the warrior's den, her paws still trembling from the night's discovery. Heronstripe was curled in her nest, her broad shoulders rising and falling steadily as she slept. Bumblepaw hesitated for only a moment before shoving her nose into her side.

"Heronstripe, wake up!" she urged, her voice strained.

The senior she-cat jolted awake, her fur bristling as she blinked up at the apprentice in confusion. "Bumblepaw? What's wrong?"

"I found something," she said quickly. "Near the riverbank where Larkshell disappeared. You have to see it."

Heronstripe's expression sharpened instantly. She rose to her paws,

shaking the sleep from her limbs, and motioned for her to lead the way. Bumblepaw's heart pounded as they left the camp, joined by Maplestar and a small patrol of warriors.

The walk to the river was tense, the silence broken only by the soft rustle of leaves and the distant rush of water. Bumblepaw kept her gaze fixed ahead, determined to show them the clues she had uncovered.

When they reached the riverbank, she pointed with her tail to the drag marks etched into the mud and the tuft of fur clinging to the thornbush. "Look," she said, her voice tight.

Heronstripe crouched to examine the fur, sniffing it carefully. Her jaw tightened. "It's Larkshell's, no doubt about it."

Maplestar stepped forward, her sun-like gaze scanning the area. "And the drag marks?"

"They lead toward the water," Bumblepaw replied, her voice trembling. "But there's something else." She hesitated before adding, "I smelled blood. It's faint, but it's there."

The patrol fell silent, the weight of her words settling over them like a heavy fog.

"This confirms the caiman is still in our territory," Heronstripe muttered grimly. "We'll need to act quickly before it strikes again."

"No," Bumblepaw snapped, surprising herself with the intensity of her voice. "This doesn't mean Larkshell is dead. It just means she was here."

Heronstripe turned to her, her gaze softening. "Bumblepaw–"

"She could still be alive!" Bumblepaw insisted, her claws digging into the mud. "We haven't found her body. We can't just assume the worst."

"Bumblepaw," Maplestar said gently but firmly, "we'll do everything we can to find her, but the evidence–"

"The evidence doesn't prove anything!" Bumblepaw interrupted, her tail lashing. "What if she escaped? What if she's hurt and waiting for us to find her? Are we just going to give up on her?"

The other warriors exchanged uncertain glances. Heronstripe stepped closer, her voice low and steady. "No one is giving up on Larkshell. But we have to be realistic. The caiman is a dangerous predator–"

"I know that!" Bumblepaw snapped, her eyes blazing. "But I'm not going to stand here and let everyone act like she's already gone. She's NightClan's medicine cat apprentice! She's strong, and she wouldn't give up so easily."

Heronstripe held her gaze for a long moment before nodding. "You're right. Larkshell is strong. And we'll do everything we can to bring her home, one way or another."

Maplestar stepped forward, her tone decisive. "We'll send out patrols to track the caiman and search for Larkshell. No stone will be left unturned."

The other warriors murmured their agreement, the tension easily slightly. Bumblepaw felt a flicker of hope amid her frustration.

As they turned to head back to camp, Heronstripe fell into step beside her. "You did well, Bumblepaw," she said quietly. "Your determination will serve you– and the Clan– well."

Bumblepaw didn't reply, her mind already racing with plans. She wouldn't rest until she found Larkshell, no matter what it took.

When the patrol reached the camp, Bumblepaw looked back toward the river, the weight of her promise settling over her.

"I'll find you, Larkshell," she whispered under her breath. "I won't let you down."

Chapter 11

[image]

The morning was cool, a faint mist still clinging to the forest floor as Mudpaw padded silently through the undergrowth. The forest seemed almost alive in the early light, the trees shifting with the soft breeze and the distant trill of birdsong echoing overhead.

Mudpaw's claws flexed reflexively as he sniffed the air, catching the faintest hint of prey. Hunting usually brought him a sense of calm, the repetitive focus on scent and sound grounding him. But today, a subtle unease prickled beneath his fur, a relentlessness he couldn't quite shake.

He shook his head, trying to push the thoughts away. *Focus, Mudpaw. Find something to bring back to camp.* Silverwing needed the nourishment, and after everything that had happened, he didn't want to give anyone another reason to whisper about him.

The scent of a squirrel reached him, warm and nutty. His ears swiveled toward a patch of ferns where the sound of faint rustling grew louder. He crouched low, his paws sliding across the soft earth with practiced ease. Being Topazshine's apprentice for two moons had shaped him to be a pretty successful hunter.

There it was– a plump squirrel, its tail twitching as it dug into the dirt. Mudpaw crept closer, his breath steady, his body coiling with anticipation.

But then, just as he prepared to spring, a strange glint caught his eye.

His gaze shifted to the right, where a faint gleam of dark, smooth stone peeked out from a cluster of moss and earth. His breath hitched.

The stone.

The squirrel darted away, but Mudpaw barely noticed. His paws froze mid-step, his heart beginning to thud in his chest. It had been weeks since he'd first stumbled upon the strange rock, and he'd completely forgotten about it. But now, here it was, as if it had been waiting for him.

His fur prickled. Every instinct screamed at him to leave, but something– curiosity, fear, or some unexplainable pull– kept him rooted to the spot.

He took a cautious step forward.

The stone was just as he remembered: unnaturally smooth, its surface pearly and blindingly bright, with faint, swirling patterns that seemed to shimmer faintly in the light.

Mudpaw's pulse quickened. He crouched low, ears flattening against his skull as he studied it. "What *are* you?" he muttered under his breath, as if expecting the stone to answer.

It didn't.

But then, just as he considered turning away, the faintest hum began to rise in the air.

"Mudpaw..."

His blood turned to ice.

He leapt back, his claws digging into the earth as he whipped his head around. The voice was faint, barely more than a whisper, but it was unmistakable.

"Who's there?" he demanded, his voice sharper than he intended.

The forest around him was unnaturally still. No birdsong, no rustling leaves– just the faint hum that seemed to emanate from the stone itself.

"Mudpaw..." The voice came again, low and mournful, sending a shiver down his spine.

He tried to back away, but his paws felt heavy, as if something unseen was holding him in place. His breath came in quick, shallow gasps. "What do you want?" he whispered.

The hum grew louder, almost rhythmic, and the whispers began to overlap– chaotic, unintelligible murmurs that twisted around him like a suffocating fog.

Images flashed in his mind, too quick to make sense of: dark water churning violently, gleaming teeth snapping shut, a shadow moving just beyond the undergrowth.

Mudpaw stumbled, his vision blurring. The whispers grew louder, building into a deafening crescendo.

"STOP!" he screamed, his voice echoing through the silent forest.

And then, just as suddenly as it had started, it stopped.

The forest returned to life– the distant rustle of leaves, the chirping of birds, the faint patter of paws in the undergrowth. Mudpaw blinked, disoriented, his body trembling as he tried to steady himself.

The stone lay silent before him, its surface dull and lifeless once more.

He didn't wait to see if it would come alive again. He turned and bolted, his paws pounding against the earth as he ran back toward camp.

What was that? The question thudded in his mind, over and over. Whatever the stone was, it wasn't just a rock.

It was something far more dangerous.

*****

Mudpaw paced outside the medicine den, his tail lashing. The stone's whispers and the eerie visions still haunted him, the sound of his own name echoing in his ears. He hadn't told anyone about it the first time. But now... it felt like the secret would claw its way

out if he didn't share it.

Silverwing would understand.

Taking a deep breath, he padded into the den. The warm, herbal scent hit him immediately, soothing but not enough to quiet his nerves. Silverwing lay in her nest, her sleek tortoiseshell fur groomed to perfection despite her recent struggles. Her left side was obscured by carefully arranged moss and cobwebs, hiding the space where her leg had once been.

"Mudpaw?" Her voice was soft, and her blue-green eyes brightened at the sight of him. "What brings you in here?"

He hesitated, his claws flexing against the smooth dirt floor. "I... I needed to talk to someone."

Silverwing's expression softened, and she shifted to sit up straighter, though the effort clearly took some energy and strain. "Of course. Sit down and tell me what's on your mind."

Mudpaw shuffled forward and sank onto his haunches, his gaze flicking to the floor. "It's about a stone I found in the forest. I found it before... before the accident."

Silverwing tilted her head. "A stone?"

He nodded, swallowing hard. "Yeah. It–it's not just strange. It spoke to me twice."

Silverwing's eyes widened slightly, but she said nothing, waiting for him to continue.

"I know it sounds crazy," he rushed on, his voice trembling. "But when I was out hunting today, I found it again. And this time, it wasn't just whispers. It–it hummed, Silverwing. Like it was alive. And then I heard voices– my *name*."

Her tail flicked thoughtfully, but her voice remained calm. "Voices? What kind of voices?"

"They sounded... distant, like they were coming from far away. But

they were clear enough that I couldn't ignore them." He shifted uncomfortably, his ears flattening. "And then I saw things. Dark water, teeth... I don't know what it all means."

Silverwing studied him for a moment before speaking. "It's not crazy, Mudpaw. Whatever this stone is, it's clearly something unusual. Did it feel... dangerous?"

"Yes," Mudpaw admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. "But it also felt like it was trying to tell me something. Like it wanted me to listen."

Silverwing's expression grew contemplative, her gaze fixed on him. "You're sure it wasn't just your imagination? I mean, after everything you've been through with Elkstep, it wouldn't be unusual to feel–"

"It wasn't that!" he snapped, then immediately flinched at his own tone. "Sorry. I didn't mean to yell. But I know what I heard, Silverwing. This wasn't in my head."

She nodded, her voice calm and soothing. "I believe you, Mudpaw. I just wanted to make sure you're not carrying too much of this on your shoulders."

His tail drooped, and his gaze fell to his paws. "I don't know what to do. It's like the stone wants something from me, but I'm scared to figure out what."

Silverwing reached out with her paw– the one she still had– and rested it gently on his. "You don't have to figure it out alone. You can always come to me if you need to talk. I may not have all the answers, but I can listen."

Mudpaw felt a lump rise in his throat. "Thanks, Silverwing. That means a lot."

Her eyes softened. "You've been through so much at such a young age, and you're still standing. That says something about you, Mudpaw. You're strong, even when you don't feel like it."

For the first time that day, a small smile tugged at his muzzle.

"Maybe."

They sat in silence for a moment, the quiet punctuated only by the faint rustling of the medicine den's herbs. Finally, Silverwing broke the silence.

"Do you think you'll go back to the stone?"

Mudpaw stiffened. The thought sent a chill down his spine, but he couldn't deny the pull he felt toward it. "I don't know. Maybe. It feels like I don't have a choice."

Silverwing nodded slowly. "Just promise me you'll be careful. And if anything happens, you'll tell someone."

"I promise," Mudpaw said, though the weight of his words lingered uneasily in his chest.

As he left the medicine den, the memory of the stone's whispers still echoed in his mind. Whatever the stone was, it wasn't done with him yet.

Chapter 12

The forest opened up into the vast clearing of the Gathering Hollow, and Bumblepaw followed her Clanmates, heart pounding against her ribs. She had imagined this moment so many times– her first Gathering, where cats from all Clans came together under the watchful eye of StarClan. Yet, instead of the excitement she'd once anticipated, an oppressive weight hung over her.

Her eyes darted nervously over the throng of cats, their voices blending into a cacophony that set her fur on edge. Tails flicked, ears twitched, and eyes glinted in the moonlight as conversations buzzed all around. Every now and then, she caught snippets of tension-filled words– territory disputes, the sudden disappearance of prey, and veiled accusations.

"Stay close," Hornetstorm murmured as he passed, his tone low but commanding.

Bumblepaw nodded, grateful for her mentor's steady presence. She stuck close to her Clanmates, her tail brushing against the pelts of familiar warriors. But despite their proximity, the absence of Larkshell loomed over her like a shadow.

The thought twisted her insides. Larkshell should have been here. Her blunt comments and quiet strength had always been a source of comfort, even when Bumblepaw hadn't realized it. Now, all she had was the memory of Larkshell's last words, her orders to run, and the hollow ache that followed.

"NightClan."

The voice was calm, smooth, and familiar. Bumblepaw froze, her fur bristling as she turned to face its source. A sleek tom stood a tail-length away, his black-and-white fur gleaming in the moonlight. His purple eyes were steady, disarmingly polite.

"It's nice to see you up close, NightClan," he said, dipping his head

slightly.

Her claws instinctively flexed against the ground. "What do you want?"

Condorstrike's mouth quirked into a small, unreadable smile. "Just a conversation. I've heard about you, Bumblepaw. It's not every day that an apprentice stands out, you know."

Bumblepaw's ears flattened, her unease deepening. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, I think you do," Condorstrike replied, his tone light but laced with something she couldn't quite place.

Before Bumblepaw could respond, a shadow moved at the edge of her vision. She whipped her head around, already recognizing the dark pelt of the approaching cat.

Darkwhisper, Condorstrike's sister.

"Well, well," the GlacierClan she-cat purred, her heather-blue eyes gleaming with amusement. "If it isn't NightClan's little magpie. You've gotten far from your nest, haven't you?"

Bumblepaw's fur spiked, her muscles tensing. "What do you want?" she demanded.

Darkwhisper grinned, a sharp and unpleasant expression. "Oh, nothing much. Just wondering if your little bird is around to chirp and defend you. Or has she flown the coop?"

"Leave Larkshell out of this!" Bumblepaw snapped, stepping forward.

Darkwhisper's grin widened, her eyes dancing with malicious delight. "Touchy, aren't we? I'm just saying it's a shame she's not here. Maybe she decided you weren't worth the trouble."

Bumblepaw let out a low growl, her claws digging into the ground. "Say that again, and you'll regret it."

Darkwhisper leaned closer, her voice dropping to a mock whisper. "Oh, I'd love to see you try."

"That's enough," Condorstrike interrupted, his voice cutting through the tension like a sharp wind.

Darkwhisper shot him a look of annoyance. "What? I'm just–"

"Leave her alone," Condorstrike said firmly. "Go stir up trouble somewhere else."

Darkwhisper huffed, her tail flicking irritably. "Fine. She's no fun anyway." With one last glance at Bumblepaw, she turned and disappeared into the crowd.

Bumblepaw glared after her, her chest heaving with barely-contained fury. She turned back to Condorstrike, her eyes narrowing.

"What do you want from me?" she demanded.

Condorstrike's gaze remained calm, almost disarmingly so. "I was only trying to talk. But I see you're not in the mood. Another time, perhaps."

Without waiting for a response, he walked away, his black-and-white tail vanishing into the swath of cats.

Bumblepaw stood frozen for a moment, her heart pounding. Something about him– his tone, his demeanor– unsettled her in a way she couldn't explain.

As the leaders began to call for order, her thoughts remained tangled, her mind racing with questions she couldn't answer. She forced herself to focus as Sparrowstar stepped forward to speak, but the unease lingered, settling deep in her chest.

When the Gathering ended and NightClan made their way back to camp, Bumblepaw couldn't shake the feeling that tonight had only been the beginning.

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The Gathering had ended on a tense note, and NightClan warriors moved through their watery territory with quiet efficiency. Bumblepaw's paws ached from leaping across slick stones and swimming through the cold, sluggish streams that crisscrossed the forest. She fell behind the group slightly, her thoughts swirling with Condorstrike's cryptic friendliness and Darkwhisper's cutting remarks.

Ahead, the camp's entrance loomed– a sandy island encircled by rivers and streams glinting under the waning moonlight. Warriors leaped across the final stones, shaking water from their pelts before slipping into the shadows of the camp. The cold bit into her fur, but she pushed forward until she felt the sand of the shore beneath her paws.

As she dragged herself onto the bank, she began grooming her soaked pelt, her tongue rasping against her fur. She was beginning to relax when a sudden burst of noise shattered the stillness.

"Stay where you are!" a warrior yowled, followed by the sound of scuffling paws and hissing. Bumblepaw's head snapped up, her heart pounding.

She darted toward the camp entrance, weaving between warriors who had formed a tight circle. In the center of the commotion stood a drenched OakClan warrior– black-and-gray with white paws and blue eyes.

"Please! I'm here to talk to Maplestar!" he cried, his voice desperate. "I mean no harm!"

"Why should we believe you?" hissed Shelltail, his brown tabby fur bristling as his claws flexed against the sand. "You're trespassing!"

"Enough." Maplestar's commanding voice cut through the tension as she emerged from her den, Heronstripe close at her side. Her yellow eyes glinting as she regarded the OakClan cat with a mix of suspicion and curiosity.

The tom dipped his head, his gaze flicking nervously around the crowd. "Maplestar, I swear I wouldn't be here if it wasn't important.

I have a warning– please, let me speak to you in private."

Maplestar's tail lashed once, her eyes narrowing, before she gave a curt nod. "Follow me, Raccoonpelt."

Heronstripe and Poolripple flanked the OakClan warrior as they moved toward Maplestar's den. Bumblepaw hesitated, her curiosity burning. Without thinking, she crept after them, her paws silent on the sandy ground. She crouched just outside the den, her ears straining to catch every word.

Inside, Raccoonpelt's voice trembled as he began. "A caiman has killed one of our warriors. Elkstep... he died saving Silverwing, who barely made it back to camp alive."

"What?" Heronstripe's sharp exclamation echoed in the den. "You mean to tell us that beast attacked your Clan as well?"

"Yes," Raccoonpelt said grimly. "And as far as we know, it's not staying in one place. The rivers are its hunting grounds. Your territory is full of them– its the most dangerous."

The sound of claws scraping against the stone floor of the den as Poolripple's voice came next, its usual fair tone sharp. "Why is OakClan silent about this? Why didn't Swifstar say anything at the Gathering?"

Bumblepaw pictured the OakClan warrior's rounded ears flattening against his head under the medicine cat's gaze. "I'm here against my leader's orders. He won't act unless more of our cats die. But I can't sit by and watch other cats fall victim. Please, Maplestar– you need to be careful."

Heronstripe growled. "You're betraying your Clan by coming here."

"I'm saving lives!" Raccoonpelt snapped, his voice rising. "I don't want what happened to Elkstep to happen to anyone else!"

A heavy silence fell. Bumblepaw's heart thundered in her chest as the weight of Raccoonpelt's words settled over her.

Finally, Maplestar spoke, her tone measured. "We'll take your

warning seriously. We've encountered this caiman in our territory. Your selfless actions are honorable and noble, Raccoonpelt, and I thank you."

Bumblepaw pictured the black-and-gray tom's head dipping with relief. "Thank you."

Bumblepaw hurriedly slinked back into the shadows as the OakClan warrior as escorted out of the camp. She stared after him, her mind racing. The caiman was also in OakClan territory and traveling back and forth, plucking victims from the land like a bird swooping down and scooping up a mouse.

Her thoughts were a whirlwind as she slipped into the apprentices' den, her fur prickling with unease. The various bodies of water that made NightClan's territory so rich and vibrant had become treacherous, hiding the deadly beast beneath their fragile surfaces.

"Larkshell..." she whispered to herself, curling tightly into her nest. A shiver ran through her. If the caiman took out a powerful cat like Elkstep, who knows what it did to an inexperienced fighter like a medicine cat apprentice?

Chapter 13

[image]

Mudpaw worked quietly in the elders' den, refreshing their moss and nudging water closer to Redstripe's nest. The elder's sharp green eyes softened as he gave a grateful grunt.

"Thank you, lad," Redstripe said, his voice raspy but kind. "You've been keeping us well-fed and watered these days."

Mudpaw forced a small smile, though his chest felt heavy. "Just doing my part."

He excused himself and padded into the clearing, his gaze dropping to the ground as thoughts of Silverwing, Elkstep, and the stone crowded his mind. The guilt still clawed at him, but he found small solace in keeping busy.

Suddenly, the camp exploded with noise. Startled, Mudpaw's head shot up to see a patrol staggering through the entrance.

Hailfrost led the group, her dark gray fur streaked with blood. Tumblespring supported a limping Smokestream, while behind them, Eveningpaw struggled to stay upright, her flank marked with an ugly bite wound. Lionflight stood by her, looking concerned.

The Clan erupted into murmurs and gasps.

"Swifstar!" Hailfrost called, her voice tight with pain. "We've got trouble!"

The leader emerged from his den with Amberheart, Lilyrose, and Blackberry thorn close behind. Swifstar's hazel eyes narrowed, his tail lashing as he took in the injured cats. "What happened?"

"The caiman," Hailfrost said, her voice shaking with suppressed anger. "It ambushed us near the DawnClan border. Stole our prey and got a few lucky bites in before we could retreat."

Gasps rippled through the clearing. Lilyrose immediately stepped forward, her calm, steady presence a stark contrast to the rising fear around her.

"Let us see to those wounds," the medicine cat said, guiding Hailfrost and the others toward the medicine den. "Tumblespring, sit here. Lionflight, bring Eveningpaw here."

As the injured cats were tended to by both she-cats, the rest of the Clan gathered in uneasy clusters. Mudpaw stood at the edge of the crowd, his stomach churning. The sight of bloodied pelts brought back memories he was trying desperately to suppress– Silverwing's mangled leg, Elkstep's lifeless body.

A young warrior, Finchspots, stepped forward, his voice breaking the tense silence. "Swiftstar, we can't stay here. That thing is hunting us. We should leave– find safer ground until it's gone."

The suggestion hung in the air, and for a moment, it seemed the entire camp held its breath.

Swifstar's hazel eyes flashed as he stepped forward, his voice cutting through the murmurs. "And go where, Finchspots? Every piece of land near our territory belongs to another Clan. Abandoning our home means risking everything."

"But what's the alternative?" Finchspots demanded, his voice rising. "Stay here and let that monster pick us off one by one?"

The murmurs grew louder. Fear was tangible, rippling through the Clan like a cold wind. Mudpaw's ears flattened as he glanced around, catching Snippaw's eye across the clearing. His brother's expression was unreadable, but there was no mistaking the tension in his stance.

Amberheart's voice rang out, silencing the crowd. "We can't show weakness now. Leaving would only make us more vulnerable."

The camp fell silent, all eyes on Swiftstar. The leader's gaze swept over his Clan, his expression firm but unreadable. Finally, he spoke.

"We will not abandon our territory," he said. His voice was calm,

but there was steel beneath it. "But we won't face this blindly. From now on, patrols will be doubled. No cat will hunt or travel alone. We will find a way to deal with this caiman– together."

Most of the crowd murmured in agreement, though unease lingered in the air. Mudpaw's chest tightened. The caiman was no longer just a distant threat; it was a shadow over their likes, a predator lurking at the edges of every decision.

As the Clan began to disperse, Mudpaw lingered near the medicine cat den. His mind was a storm of conflicting thoughts. The image of Elkstep's sacrifice haunted him, and now the caiman had attacked again, reinforcing the ever-present danger.

"We can't keep living like this," he overheard Finchspots muttering to Batears, his brother. "Something has to change."

The distant ripple of the river reached his ears, its calm sound at odds with the chaos raging in his heart.

*****

Mudpaw crouched low beside the elders' den, his paws working a fresh tuft of moss over a scratchy patch in Redstripe's nest. The tom grumbled behind him, muttering about being bored and the damp chill that crept through the camp every night. Mudpaw tried to focus on his task, but the rising tension in the clearing outside tugged at his attention like a persistent burr caught in his fur.

The hunting patrol had returned with injuries and little prey, their fear palpable as they recounted their encounter with the caiman. Thymesnow's tail hung low, blood dripping from a gash in her side where the beast had struck her. Elmstorm, one of the strongest warriors in the Clan, limped with a nasty tear in his hind leg. Despite their wounds, none of the injuries were fatal– but the damage to morale was far worse.

The once-busy camp was now a swirling storm of anxiety. Cats gathered in tight knots, their voices rising in panicked whispers. Mudpaw strained to hear their words as he worked, his ears swiveling toward the commotion.

"This isn't safe anymore," Finchspots hissed, his tail lashing. "We're sitting here like prey waiting to be picked off."

"And where do you suggest we go?" Riverwater snapped, her blue eyes narrowed. "The other Clans won't welcome us with open paws. They'd sooner fight us off than share their territory."

"At least DawnClan and GlacierClan don't have a monster lurking in their rivers," Finchspots retorted. "If we explained–"

"They wouldn't care," Riverwater interrupted sharply. "We'd be invaders in their eyes. And what happens if the caiman follows us there? We'd be putting their cats in danger, too."

Nearby, Wildwing stood with Hailfrost and a few other warriors, his voice low but firm. Mudpaw stiffened as he caught snippets of the conversation.

"Swiftstar is a fool if he thinks we can stay here," Wildwing growled. "We've had too many injured cats already, and it's only a matter of time before more of us end up in that thing's jaws. If he won't act, then maybe it's time someone else did."

Hailfrost's eyes widened. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

Wildwing's gaze darkened. "I'm saying we can't keep following a leader who's leading us to ruin. If Swiftstar won't protect us, maybe it's time for a change."

Mudpaw's paws froze mid-motion, his heart pounding in his chest. His father– his steady, dependable father– was talking about overthrowing Swiftstar? The thought made his stomach churn. He tried to shake it off, focusing back on the moss in his claws, but the words hung heavy in the air.

Other voices joined the fray, their panic bubbling over into heated arguments.

"We could go to DawnClan," suggested Pearpool, a senior queen. "Their territory is dry– our kits would be safe there."

"And leave our ancestors behind?" Larkflight, her mate, sounded incredulous. "OakClan was built on these lands! I've left once already, and you want to leave because things are hard?"

"Hard?" Pearpool shot back, her fur bristling. "This isn't just 'hard'--this is survival! I'm not going to sit around waiting for my kits to be dragged into the water by that beast– especially when I don't have the claws to save them!"

Mudpaw's chest tightened as he listened, his thoughts racing. The Clan was fracturing before his eyes, fear driving a wedge between cats who had once stood shoulder to shoulder. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. Was this really his Clan? The proud, strong OakClan that he had always admired?

"Hey, Mudpaw," Redstripe meowed from behind him, jolting him out of his thoughts. "You've been working that same patch of moss for ages. What's got your tail in a twist?"

Mudpaw glanced back at the elder, his ears burning. "Nothing," he mumbled, hastily finishing the nest.

Redstripe snorted, his eyes narrowing. "You're a terrible liar, kit. Go on– get out of here. I'll be fine."

Mudpaw hesitated but finally nodded, backing out of the den. As he stepped into the clearing, the arguments seemed louder, the tension more suffocating. His paws itched to run, to escape the weight of it all, but he forced himself to stay.

He caught sight of Wildwing again, his father's words echoing in his mind. *If Swifstar won't protect us, maybe it's time for a change.*

Mudpaw swallowed hard and padded over, his legs feeling like they were weighed down with stones. "Dad?" he said quietly, his voice barely audible over the din.

Wildwing turned, his expression softening slightly at the sight of his son. "What is it, Mudpaw?"

Mudpaw hesitated, his gaze flicking to the warriors around him. "Do you really think... Do you really think we should leave? Or– or

overthrow Swiftstar?"

Wildwing's ears twitched, and he exchanged a glance with Hailfrost before answering. "I think we need to do what's best for our family," he said carefully. "I'd rather live in another Clan– or take matters into my own paws– than let us become that beast's next meal."

The words hit Mudpaw like a blow, and he took a step back, his tail drooping. "But... Swiftstar's our leader. And Amberheart– she's trying her best."

"Trying isn't enough," Wildwing said firmly. "Leaders are supposed to protect their Clan. If Swiftstar and Amberheart can't do that, then we need to think about what's best for ourselves."

Mudpaw didn't know what to say. His mind raced with conflicting thoughts, his heart aching at the thought of leaving OakClan– or worse, seeing his Clanmates turn on each other. He had always believed in the strength of his Clan, but now that strength felt like it was crumbling.

As the sun dipped lower in the sky, casting long shadows across the camp, Mudpaw realized one thing: the caiman wasn't the only threat they faced. The fear and division within their own ranks might destroy them long before the beast did.

Chapter 14

Bumblepaw woke to the faint light of dawn spilling through the brambles of the apprentice den. The moss beneath her was damp from the night's humidity, and the usual comforting sounds of the camp– soft murmurs of warriors waking, the gentle babble of nearby streams– seemed eerily subdued.

She sat up, her fur ruffled from sleep, and glanced around the den. Most of her denmates were still curled in their nests, their flanks rising and falling steadily. Only Snailpaw was awake, lying lazily in his corner with one paw draped over his muzzle. His amber eyes followed her as she stretched, and she suppressed a groan.

"You're up early," he commented, his voice low and smug. "Another sleepless night, Bumblepaw?"

She shot him a sharp look. "What's it to you?"

Snailpaw chuckled softly, shifting to make himself more comfortable. "Nothing. Just wondering if you're planning to stick your nose in business that isn't yours again."

Bumblepaw's tail lashed, but she forced herself to turn away and ignore him. She wasn't in the mood to trade barbs with Snailpaw– not today.

Poking her head out of the den, she was met with the sight of a camp weighed down by unease. A cluster of warriors had gathered near the fresh-kill pile, their voices low but urgent. Stonebriar's tail lashed as she spoke, her posture rigid with tension.

"How many more patrols are we going to lose to that thing?" Stonebriar's voice was sharp, carrying across the clearing despite her attempt to keep it quiet.

"We have to eat," Nettlethorn replied, his tone defensive. "What do you want us to do? Starve the Clan? Avoid the rivers entirely?"

Bumblepaw's ears pricked, her curiosity pulling her closer. She padded toward the group, pretending to inspect the fresh-kill pile, though it was painfully sparse. Only a single, scrawny fish lay atop the stones, its dull scales glinting weakly in the morning light.

"That's easy for you to say," Stonebriar hissed, her voice dropped to near a whisper. "You weren't on the patrol that thing ambushed."

Bumblepaw froze, her heart skipping a beat. Her gaze darted to Stonebriar's face, which was drawn tight with worry.

"I'm just saying we have to be careful," Stonebriar continued, her claws digging into the ground. "We can't keep sending cats out there like it's nothing. That caiman is smart– it knows where we hunt, and it's waiting for us."

Nettlethorn's tail lashed, but before he could respond, Bumblepaw felt a flicker of movement behind her.

"Eavesdropping again, are we?" Snailpaw's voice was a low murmur, but it carried enough amusement to make her fur bristle.

She spun around to face him, her eyes narrowing. "I'm not eavesdropping. I'm just–"

"Listening in on a conversation you're not part of?" he finished, his amber eyes glinting with mischief. "You're going to get yourself in trouble one day, Bumblepaw."

"Mind your own business," she snapped, her tail lashing.

Snailpaw smirked, his expression maddeningly calm. "Just saying, you've got a habit of sticking your nose where it doesn't belong. Not very smart, especially with everything that's going on."

"I don't need advice from you," Bumblepaw growled.

"Suit yourself," he said, his smirk widening. "But don't say I didn't warn you."

As he sauntered off, Bumblepaw let out a frustrated huff, her claws scraping against the ground. She turned back toward the group of

warriors, but their conversation had already ended, the tension lingering in the air like a storm cloud.

Bumblepaw stared at the fresh-kill pile, her stomach churning. The single fish seemed to mock her, a reminder of how dire their situation had become. The caiman wasn't just a threat– it was a predator that had claimed their territory as its own.

For a moment, she considered going back to the den and burying herself in her nest, but the weight of unease kept her rooted in place. She couldn't shake the feeling that things were only going to get worse.

As the morning sun climbed higher, the camp stirred with activity, but the heaviness in the air remained. Bumblepaw's paws itched with restlessness. She didn't know what she could do to help, but sitting idle wasn't an option– not with so much at stake.

She glanced toward the warriors' den, where Maplestar's shadow moved against the brambles. Whatever decisions the leader made today, Bumblepaw hoped they would be enough to keep their Clan safe. For now, all she could do was wait– and hope.

*****

The morning sun glinted off the rippling streams that snaked through NightClan's territory, their sparkling beauty doing little to lift Bumblepaw's mood. She padded alongside Hornetstorm, her mentor's muscular frame casting a long shadow over her smaller form. The air was thick with the scent of damp earth and fish, but it was overshadowed by an unspoken tension that seemed to cling to every blade of grass.

"I know you've been distracted," Hornetstorm began, his voice steady but low enough to suggest he didn't want the others to overhear.

Bumblepaw bristled at his words but kept her gaze on the path ahead. "I'm fine," she muttered, though even she didn't believe it.

Hornetstorm gave a soft snort. "Fine cats don't stare at the camp

walls like they're expecting them to crumble. You're not the only one struggling, Bumblepaw. But we're warriors– our strength comes from our ability to adapt."

Bumblepaw bit back a retort, her claws flexing into the soft earth. It was easy for Hornetstorm to talk about strength and resilience. He wasn't the one lying awake at night, haunted by the thought of his best friend never returning.

They reached a sandy clearing where Snowtrail and Brindlepaw were already waiting. Despite the tension between Brindlepaw's brothers and Bumblepaw, the tortoiseshell apprentice beamed brightly when she saw Bumblepaw.

"This is a waste of time," Snowtrail grumbled. "Every moment we spend here is another moment that thing could be creeping closer to camp."

"We need to train," Brindlepaw countered, her tone clipped. "We're not going to survive another ambush if we don't learn how to fight as a team."

Heronstripe stepped forward, her authoritative presence silencing the brewing argument. "Brindlepaw is right. Training is crucial, especially now. The caiman may be a beast, but it's not invincible. We just need to be smarter."

Bumblepaw's ears twitched at the words. *Smarter.* The caiman already seemed smarter than them, anticipating their movements and striking when they were most vulnerable. How could they possibly outwit it?

Hornetstorm turned to Bumblepaw, his blue-green eyes sharp. "We'll start with reflexes. Bumblepaw, you're with me. Snowtrail and Brindlepaw, pair up."

Bumblepaw swallowed hard and stepped forward, her paws feeling heavier with each step. Hornetstorm crouched, his muscles coiled like a spring. "When I move, you dodge. No hesitation. Ready?"

She barely had time to nod before he lunged, his paw swiping

toward her with surprising speed. Bumblepaw yelped and jumped back, narrowly avoiding the blow.

"Too slow," Heronstripe said, her tone devoid of mockery but firm nonetheless.

"I–" Bumblepaw bit her tongue, refusing to make excuses. She adjusted her stance, her tail lashing as she prepared for the next attack.

This time, she was quicker. When Hornetstorm feinted left and darted right, she managed to sidestep, her paws skidding slightly on the sand.

"Better," he said, nodding approvingly. "But keep your center of gravity lower. If you lose your footing, you're done."

As they continued, Bumblepaw found herself falling into a rhythm, her movements becoming more fluid. But the nagging doubts in her mind refused to quiet. Each swipe of Hornetstorm's paw reminded her of the caiman's jaws, and the thought sent a shiver down her spine.

"What if it's already in the river by camp?" The question slipped out before she could stop it, her voice trembling slightly.

Hornetstorm paused, his eyes narrowing. "It's not," he said firmly. "And even if it was, we'd deal with it. Fear won't help you, Bumblepaw. Focus."

She clenched her jaw and nodded, though his words did little to ease her mind.

Nearby, Snowtrail and Brindlepaw's argument escalated.

"I'm telling you, we should leave," Snowtrail snapped, her fur bristling. "We're sitting ducks here!"

"And go where?" Brindlepaw shot back. "Every Clan has predators in their territory. What makes you think we'd be safer somewhere else?"

"At least we'd have a chance to regroup!" Snowtrail growled. "Right now, we're just waiting to get picked off one by one!"

Their voices carried across the clearing, drawing Heronstripe's attention. She sighed and shook her head. "Keep practicing," she told Bumblepaw before striding over to the arguing kin.

Bumblepaw watched her go, her chest tightening. She felt caught in the middle of a storm she didn't know how to weather. On one side was the overwhelming fear that Snowtrail voiced so bluntly, and on the other was the stubborn determination that kept cats like Brindlepaw, Heronstripe, and Hornetstorm moving forward.

As she crouched, waiting for Hornetstorm to strike, Bumblepaw couldn't shake the feeling that their training was a futile attempt to prepare for something far beyond their control. The rivers weren't just part of their territory anymore– they were a battleground. And the caiman was a shadow that loomed over all of them, unrelenting and unstoppable.

When Hornetstorm moved, he didn't comment on the argument. Instead, he motioned for her to stand. "We'll switch to offense now," he said. "You need to know how to land a solid hit, even against something bigger than you."

Bigger than her. The words echoed in her mind as she stared at her mentor, her paws suddenly feeling like they were sinking into the sand. How could she possibly stand up to something as massive and deadly as the caiman?

Hornetstorm must have sensed her hesitation because he added, "You're stronger than you think, Bumblepaw. Trust me."

She wanted to believe him. She wanted to believe that she could make a difference, that their training wasn't just an exercise in futility. But as she lunged forward, her claws swiping through empty air, she couldn't ignore the sinking feeling that no amount of practice would prepare her for what was coming.

Chapter 15

[image]

The rain had been relentless for days, but tonight it had turned into something else entirely– a deafening deluge that drowned out all other sound. Mudpaw crouched in the middle of the camp, his fur plastered to his sides as water streamed down in sheets. Around him, cats darted in every direction, their voices rising in panicked cries as they worked to save their nests, elders, and families.

"Get to higher ground!" Wildwing's powerful yowl cut through the chaos, his voice barely audible over the roar of the rain. "Don't stop for anything– move!"

Mudpaw's paws were rooted to the soaked ground, his heart thundering in his chest. The small streams that usually crisscrossed the camp had swollen into rushing rivers, their currents so fierce they tore away clumps of earth and debris. Water pooled around his paws, rising steadily, and he realized with growing horror that the camp itself was beginning to flood.

"Mudpaw!" Eveningpaw's voice jolted him back to reality. She was clambering up onto a fallen log near the camp's edge, her green eyes wide with fear. "We have to go– now!"

Snippaw appeared beside her, his fur spiked with rain. "Come on, Mudpaw! We can't stay here!"

Mudpaw nodded, forcing his legs to move. His claws scrabbled for purchase on the slick ground as he made his way toward his siblings. The water was already lapping at his belly, icy and relentless, and the currents tugged at his legs with every step.

Suddenly, a loud crack split the air as one of the ancient trees near the camp entrance gave way, its roots torn free by the rushing water. The tree fell with a thunderous crash, sending a massive wave surging through the camp. Cats yowled with terror as they were knocked off their paws and swept away by the sudden torrent.

"Get up here!" Eveningpaw shouted, stretching out a paw as Mudpaw stumbled against the wave. He leaped for the log, his claws sinking into the wet bark as he hauled himself up.

"Where's Snippaw?" Mudpaw gasped, his head whipping around.

Eveningpaw's eyes widened. "He was right behind me–"

A terrified yowl cut her off, and Mudpaw's heart stopped. Snippaw was clinging to a jagged rock in the middle of the rushing water, his legs flailing as the current tried to drag him away.

"Help!" Snippaw cried, his voice raw with fear. "I can't hold on!"

Without thinking, Mudpaw launched himself off the log, plunging into the icy water. The current hit him like a battering ram, nearly sweeping him off his paws, but he gritted his teeth and fought against it. His legs burned as he struggled toward Snippaw, his breaths coming in short, desperate gasps.

"I'm coming!" Mudpaw shouted, though his words felt lost in the roar of the storm.

As he reached Snipppaw, Mudpaw clamped his jaws onto his brother's scruff and pulled with all his strength. The current fought back, tugging at both of them, but Mudpaw dug his claws into the muddy riverbed and refused to let go. Inch by inch, he dragged Snippaw toward the log where Eveningpaw waited, her paws outstretched.

"You can do it!" Eveningpaw cried, her voice trembling. "Just a little further!"

With a final, desperate heave, Mudpaw pushed Snippaw toward the log. Eveningpaw grabbed their brother's scruff and hauled him up, her claws slipping on the wet bark. Mudpaw followed, his limbs shaking as he collapsed onto the log beside his siblings.

Snippaw coughed and sputtered, water streaming from his fur. "You saved me," he gasped, his voice hoarse.

"Of course I did," Mudpaw replied, his chest heaving. "You're my

brother."

Eveningpaw pressed close to both of them, her fur trembling as much from fear as from the cold. "We have to keep moving," she said, her voice low but urgent. "The water's still rising."

Mudpaw forced himself to his paws, his legs quaking beneath him. He glanced around the camp, his stomach churning at the sight. The water had swallowed most of the clearing, leaving only the tops of dens and a few scattered logs visible. Cats were scrambling for safety, their panicked cries filling the air.

Near the nursery, Larkflight and Pearpool were carrying their kits onto a makeshift raft of fallen branches. Across the clearing, Finchspots was hauling Redstripe onto higher ground, his muscles straining as he aided the elder.

But not everyone was making it. Mudpaw's heart clenched as he saw Whorlwind get swept away by the current, his cry cut off as he vanished beneath the water.

"This isn't happening," Mudpaw whispered, his voice barely audible.

"It is," Eveningpaw said grimly, nudging him forward. "But we have to survive. For them."

Mudpaw nodded, swallowing hard. He followed his siblings as they climbed higher, the storm raging around them. The water rose steadily, its icy grip a constant reminder of the danger they faced.

As the night wore on, Mudpaw couldn't shake the feeling that this was only the beginning. OakClan's territory was disappearing beneath the flood, and their future seemed as uncertain as the stormy sky above. But for now, all he could do was keep moving–and pray that they would find safety before it was too late.

*****

The storm had begun to ebb, but the destruction it left in its wake was more horrifying than the flood itself. Mudpaw clung to his siblings as they navigated the unfamiliar landscape, their territory transformed into a labyrinth of waterlogged debris and murky

pools. The air was heavy with the smell of mud and death, and the silence between the siblings felt deafening.

"Do you think anyone else made it out?" Snippaw's voice was small, trembling like a leaf caught on the wind.

"They had to," Eveningpaw said, though her voice lacked its usual fire. "OakClan is strong. We'll find them."

Mudpaw stayed silent, his paws squelching in the soaked ground as they trudged through the wreckage. Every fallen tree and twisted branch felt like a reminder of what they had lost. He focused on moving forward, on staying upright, even as exhaustion gnawed at his limbs.

The sight of two familiar pelts brought Mudpaw to an abrupt halt. Relief flooded him as he recognized Topazshine and Silverwing perched on a patch of higher ground. Both she-cats looked worn but otherwise unharmed, their fur plastered to their sides.

"Mudpaw! Eveningpaw! Snippaw!" Topazshine called, her voice carrying a mix of relief and urgency. She bounded forward, her light blue eyes scanning them for injuries. "You're all okay?"

"We're fine," Eveningpaw said, though her voice wavered. "What about the others?"

Silverwing, her tortoiseshell pelt streaked with mud, hauled herself forward, her expression grim and pained. "We haven't found many yet. The water swept through faster than anyone could react. We need to split up and find whoever we can."

Snippaw bristled, his ears flattening. "You're sending us out again? What if we don't find anyone? What if the water comes back?"

Topazshine rested her tail on his shoulder, her gaze soft but firm. "You'll stay together. You're strong, Snippaw, and you have each other. Just search the area and come back here if you can't find anyone. We'll be waiting."

Mudpaw nodded, though his stomach churned at the thought of what they might find. "We'll do our best," he said quietly.

"Good." Silverwing gave him a warm look and nodded. "Be careful. The ground is unstable, and the water's still dangerous in places."

As they set off, Mudpaw tried to push his fear aside, focusing instead on the task at hand. The three siblings moved cautiously, their senses on high alert. Every shadow, every ripple in the water felt like a threat.

"Do you think anyone's...?" Snippaw trailed off, his voice breaking.

Mudpaw swallowed hard. "We'll find them," he said, though he didn't know if he believed it.

They didn't have to go far to find their first Clanmate. Mudpaw's heart leaped as he spotted Cypressfern huddled beneath a leaning tree, her silver tabby fur streaked with mud. She looked up as they approached, her eyes wide with fear and exhaustion.

"Thank StarClan," she whispered, struggling to her paws.

Mudpaw and Eveningpaw helped her up, guiding her to a more stable area. "Stay here," Eveningpaw said. "We'll find more and bring them back."

But not everyone they found was alive.

The first body they discovered was curled beneath a tangled mass of roots, the lifeless form of Flamepool was barely recognizable through the mud and water. Snippaw froze at the sight, his legs trembling as he stared.

"He didn't make it," Eveningpaw said softly, her voice breaking.

Mudpaw placed his tail over Snippaw's back. "Come on. We have to keep moving."

Snippaw nodded shakily, his eyes tearing up.

Then they found Bearheart.

The massive tom lay half-submerged in a pool of water, his thick brown fur slick and lifeless. Snippaw let out a choked gasp,

stumbled back as if struck.

"No," he whispered, shaking his head. "No, not him."

Mudpaw's heart twisted painfully. Bearheart had been Snippaw's mentor, a steady presence in his life. Seeing him like this felt like losing a part of their family.

Snippaw collapsed to the ground, his sides heaving as he tried to breathe through his sobs. "He was supposed to teach me everything," he cried. "He was supposed to..."

Mudpaw crouched beside his brother, pressing against him. "I know," he murmured, his own voice thick with grief. "I know, Snippaw. I'm so sorry."

Eveningpaw stood a short distance away, her head bowed. "We have to bury him," she said quietly, her voice trembling

Mudpaw nodded. Together, they dragged Bearheart's body to higher ground, their movements slow and heavy. They didn't have the time for a proper burial, but they made sure he was safe from the water.

Snippaw pressed his nose to Bearheart's fur one last time. "I'll make you proud," he whispered.

When they finally returned to Topazshine and Silverwing, they were exhausted and weighed down by grief. They had found a few more survivors along the way, guiding them to safety, but the sight of bodies they couldn't save lingered in Mudpaw's mind. *Flamepool, Diverstripe, Rainclaw, Rowanflower, Bearheart...*

"You did well," Topazshine said softly, her voice filled with both sorrow and pride.

Mudpaw only nodded, his throat too tight to speak. As he sat beside his siblings, staring out at the ruined landscape, he couldn't shake the feeling that their lives would never be the same again.

Chapter 16

The forest near the GlacierClan border was eerily quiet, save for the occasional drip of water from the trees above. Bumblepaw wove through the undergrowth, her paws squelching softly against the damp ground. Every snap of a twig or rustle of leaves set her heart racing, only for her hope to falter when no familiar black pelt appeared.

She pushed further along the border, her nose twitching as she tried to pick up any lingering scent of Larkshell. It had been days since the last horrible rain storm that had risen the water in NightClan's territory to a dangerous height, and every search Bumblepaw had undertaken since had ended the same– empty and heart-wrenching.

Finally, she stopped beside a shallow pool of water, its surface reflecting the dim gray sky. Minnows darted beneath the surface, their movements creating tiny ripples that distorted her reflection. Bumblepaw stared into the water, her tail dragging behind her.

"You always hated being fussed over," she murmured, her voice barely audible. "You'd roll your eyes and tell me to save my energy for something useful."

The thought of Larkshell's dry humor brought a lump to her throat. Bumblepaw clenched her teeth, her claws digging into the muddy earth. "You better be out there, Larkshell. You better be alive."

The silence around her felt heavy, pressing down on her as if the forest itself were mourning.

A sudden rustle from the GlacierClan side of the border snapped her out of her thoughts. She turned sharply, fur bristling, as a sleek black tom with white flecks emerged from the shadows. Condorstrike.

"Well, look who it is," he said, his voice as smooth as it was at the Gathering as he stopped just shy of the border.

Bumblepaw relaxed slightly but kept her eyes wary. "Condorstrike," she said curtly. "What do you want?"

He smirked, settling down on his side of the border with an air of nonchalance. "You're awfully close to our territory. Thought I'd see what you were up to."

"I'm not trespassing," she replied, her tone defensive.

"I didn't say you were." His indigo eyes gleamed with amusement. "But you don't exactly look like you're out here for a relaxing stroll."

Bumblepaw huffed, turning back to the pool. "I'm looking for someone."

Condorstrike's ears flicked forward. "Larkshell, I assume?"

The mention of her best friend made Bumblepaw's chest tighten. She glanced at him, suspicion flickering in her eyes. "How do you know about her?"

"Cats talk," he said simply. "And I have ears."

Bumblepaw narrowed her eyes. "What else have you heard?"

"Not much," he admitted, his tone softening. "Just that she's missing. Floods and caimans don't make for a good combination."

His words struck a nerve, and Bumblepaw's fur bristled. "Don't talk about her like that. You don't know her."

Condorstrike tilted his head, his smirk fading slightly. "You're right. I don't. But I can see how much she means to you."

Bumblepaw looked away, her gaze dropping back to the pool. The minnows darted aimlessly, their movements a stark contrast to the stillness she felt inside. "She's not like other cats," she said quietly. "She's... blunt, sure. But she's honest. She always knows what to say to make things make sense."

Condorstrike watched her for a moment, his expression unreadable. "She sounds like a good friend."

"She is," Bumblepaw whispered.

The silence between them stretched, the tension easing slightly but not disappearing entirely. Bumblepaw turned to Condorstrike again, her yellow eyes searching his face. "Why are you even here?"

He shrugged. "Curiosity, mostly. You stood out at the Gathering. Figured I'd see if you were still as fiery as you seemed then."

Bumblepaw snorted, a reluctant smirk tugging at her lips. "You don't know the half of it."

Condorstrike chuckled softly but didn't respond. After a moment, Bumblepaw rose to her paws. "I need to get back. If you're trying to distract me, it's not going to work."

"Distract you?" Condorstrike said with mock innocence. "I wouldn't dream of it."

She gave him a pointed look before stepping back from the border. "Goodbye, Condorstrike."

"Until next time, Bumblepaw," he said, his voice light but carrying an edge of something deeper.

As she walked away, she glanced over her shoulder once. Condorstrike was still sitting there, his indigo eyes following her until she disappeared into the trees.

*****

Bumblepaw padded into the makeshift camp the Clan had assembled on higher ground. The floodwaters from the storm had receded slightly, leaving behind a battered and weary NightClan. Cats huddled together in the patchy sunlight, their pelts still muddy and matted. The air was heavy with the scent of damp fur and fear.

As Bumblepaw wove through the crowd, her gaze fell on Shelltail and Brightnose sitting apart near a cluster of reeds. Their grief was palpable– Shelltail's brown tabby pelt seemed duller than usual, and Brightnose's usually bright blue-purple eyes were clouded with sorrow.

When Bumblepaw approached, Brightnose's head lifted, and her gaze softened. "Bumblepaw," she said, her voice cracking. "Thank you for coming."

Shelltail nodded, his shoulders slumping as if the weight of the world rested on them. "We've heard about your searches," he murmured. "You've done more than we could ever ask."

Bumblepaw shuffled her paws, guilt gnawing at her heart. "It's the least I can do," she said quietly. "Larkshell... she's my best friend. I can't just stop looking for her."

Brightnose's breath hitched, and she leaned against Shelltail, who wrapped his tail around her. "She always talked about how much you meant to her," Brightnose said, tears glistening in her eyes. "Thank you for not giving up."

Before Bumblepaw could respond, a soft rustling behind her drew her attention. Poolripple approached, his pale brown fur unkempt and his orange eyes dull. He glanced at Bumblepaw and then at his parents, his expression a mixture of pain and guilt.

"Bumblepaw," Poolripple said gently, gesturing with his tail. "Can we talk?"

She hesitated but nodded, following him to a quieter corner of the camp. As they sat down, Poolripple's shoulders sagged, and he let out a weary sigh.

"I've failed her," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Bumblepaw blinked, startled by the raw emotion in his tone. "Poolripple, you didn't–"

"I'm her brother," he interrupted, his orange eyes locking onto hers. "I'm her *mentor*. I was supposed to teach her, guide her, protect her. And now she's gone."

The anguish in his voice cut through Bumblepaw like claws. She looked down, her paws scuffing the ground. "You're not the only one who feels guilty," she admitted, her voice trembling. "I was there when it happened. I was face-to-face with the caiman, and I

ran. I shouldn't have listened to her. I didn't stop to see if she was okay."

Poolripple stared at her, his expression softening. "Bumblepaw... you were scared. Anyone would've been. That doesn't make it your fault."

"But it feels like it is," she said, her voice breaking. "I keep thinking, what if I'd done something differently? What if I'd stayed? Maybe Larkshell would still be here."

Poolripple moved closer, placing his tail gently over hers. "We can't undo the past," he said quietly. "But we can honor her by continuing to search for her, and by fighting for her and the Clan. That's what Larkshell would've wanted, right?"

Chapter 17

[image]

Mudpaw stood at the edge of the burial site, the scent of damp earth and rainwater clinging to his fur. The graves stretched before him, each mound of dirt a stark reminder of the devastation the flood had wrought. Flamepool, Diverstripe, Rainclaw, Rowanflower, Bearheart, Rosefall, Redstripe, and Smokestream now rested beneath the soil, their names echoing in his mind like a chant.

Hailfrost pressed close to his side, her fur still damp and cold from the storm. On her other side, Wildwing stood stiffly, his usually steady presence frayed by grief. Eveningpaw and Snippaw huddled next to Mudpaw, their pelts brushing against him as though they could anchor each other in this sea of loss.

The Clan gathered in a ragged circle around the graves, their expressions a mixture of sorrow and simmering resentment. Swiftstar sat at the center, his fur plastered to his lean frame and his gaze distant. His usual commanding presence seemed diminished, like a shadow of the leader he once was.

"We shouldn't be here," someone muttered.

Mudpaw's ears twitched at the voice– Finchspots', sharp and accusing.

"This land isn't safe," another cat hissed. "It's just as vulnerable as the old camp. Swiftstar should've thought of that before leading us into this mess."

"He lost three lives trying to save us!" Silverwing's voice cut through the murmurs, her tone sharp enough to silence the growing unrest. She pulled herself forward, her tail lashing. "Blame the storm, blame the flood, but don't you dare blame a cat who gave everything to protect his Clan!"

Finchspots glared at her, his hazel eyes flashing. "Protection? Is that

what you call it? We've lost our camp, our safety, and eight of our Clanmates. How many more have to die before you realize Swiftstar's leadership is failing us?"

"Enough." Swiftstar's voice was hoarse but steady as he rose to his paws. The Clan turned to look at him, their anger simmering just beneath the surface. "I know the losses we've suffered. I carry them with me, just as you do. But now is not the time to turn on each other. We will mourn tonight and rebuild tomorrow."

His words hung in the air, heavy and unconvincing. There was no murmur of agreement, no spark of hope to rekindle the Clan's unity. Instead, the silence was thick with doubt.

Mudpaw's heart ached as he watched his leader retreat into the shadows, Dawnflame hurrying after him. The once-proud tom now looked like a ghost of himself, weighed down by guilt and the bitter glares of his Clanmates.

Wildwing's voice broke the silence. "Let's go," he said gruffly, nudging his family toward a patch of raised ground where they could settle for the night.

Hailfrost led the way, her head low but her steps firm. Eveningpaw and Snippaw stayed close to Mudpaw as they walked, their tails brushing against his in a silent show of solidarity.

They found shelter beneath the sprawling roots of a fallen tree, its branches forming a natural canopy. As Hailfrost and Wildwing curled up together, the siblings huddled nearby, their exhaustion heavy but sleep elusive.

"Do you think they're right?" Snippaw asked suddenly, his voice barely above a whisper.

Mudpaw glanced at his brother. "About what?"

"About leaving." Snippaw's light green eyes shone with worry. "About Swiftstar being... wrong."

Eveningpaw shifted, her gaze fixed on the darkness beyond their shelter. "I don't know," she said quietly. "But what other choice do

we have? Swiftstar's all we've got. Without him, what happens to us?"

Mudpaw's thoughts churned. He wanted to believe in Swiftstar, to hold onto the image of the strong leader who had guided their Clan through so many trials. But the doubts creeping into his mind were as relentless as the floodwaters that had torn their camp apart.

"I heard Finchspots talking earlier," Snippaw said hesitantly. "He said if Swiftstar doesn't step down, we should force him to."

Eveningpaw's head snapped toward him, her ears flattening. "That's treason," she hissed.

Snippaw flinched but didn't back down. "Is it treason to want to survive? To protect our family?"

"Enough," Wildwing growled, his voice cutting through the tension. He lifted his head, his expression dark and unreadable. "We've lost too much already. We can't afford to lose each other."

Snippaw opened his mouth to speak, but Wildwing silenced him with a sharp glare. "We'll follow Swiftstar for now," he said. "But if it comes to choosing between him and my family, I'll do what I have to."

Mudpaw's stomach twisted at his father's words. He had always seen Wildwing as a steady rock, a cat who would never falter in his loyalty to the Clan. Hearing him speak of rebellion– or leaving– shook something deep within him.

As the night wore on, the siblings lay close together, their breathing shallow and restless. Mudpaw stared at the canopy of leaves above them, his mind racing. The Clan was fractured, their faith in their leader splintered. Grief and fear had turned them against each other, and now even his own father spoke of abandoning the very foundation of their lives.

He pressed closer to his siblings, their warmth a fragile comfort in the midst of the chaos. Whatever lay ahead, he knew one thing for certain: they would need each other more than ever.

*****

The morning was heavy with silence as Mudpaw stood atop the ridge, gazing down at the remnants of OakClan's camp. The floodwaters had receded, leaving behind a graveyard of broken dens, uprooted plants, and pools of stagnant water. The earth smelled of rot and mud, and the once-thriving clearing looked foreign in its devastation.

Mudpaw swallowed hard. His paws shifted uneasily on the damp ground, and his claws scraped against the mud. Cats moved below like ghosts, their voices muffled and their movements sluggish. He could see Amberheart crouched near the warrior's den– or what was left of it– pawing through the debris with an almost frantic determination. Wildwing and Hailfrost were reinforcing a makeshift shelter with whatever branches they could find. Eveningpaw and Snippaw were dragging pieces of sodden bramble into a pile, their faces frim and streaked with mud.

"We'll rebuild," Swiftstar's voice carried faintly from the remnants of the leader's den. Mudpaw's ears flicked toward the sound. The leader's tone, once commanding, now wavered with exhaustion and doubt.

Mudpaw barely heard the words before the voices of his Clanmates rose in bitter retort.

"Rebuild? With what?" hissed Cherrysoot, her tail lashing. "We have nothing left. Half the camp is gone!"

"And so are half our Clanmates," added Lilacshine, her voice thick with grief. "We're supposed to stay here and just... pretend everything is fine?"

Amberheart stepped forward, her ears flat. "We're alive. That has to count for something. We'll make it count."

"Alive for how long?" Cherrysoot shot back. "Until the next storm? Until the floodwaters come back?"

Mudpaw turned away from the scene, his chest tight. The anger, the

grief, the hopelessness– it was too much. Every word carried a weight that pressed down on him like the sodden earth beneath his paws. He had to get away, even if it was just for a little while.

"I'll find food," he murmured to himself, his voice barely audible over the din of the camp.

No one stopped him as he padded into the forest. The air was thick and humid, the ground slick beneath his paws. The storm had swept away much of the undergrowth, leaving the forest floor exposed and unfamiliar. Mudpaw's stomach growled, but he pushed the hunger aside, focusing instead on the task at hand.

His ears twitched at the rustle of reeds near a shallow stream. Dropping into a crouch, he crept forward, his eyes locking onto a water vole scurrying along the muddy bank. His heart raced as he leapt, his claws connecting with the vole's flank. It squirmed for only a moment before going limp in his jaws.

He buried the vole and pressed on, his senses sharp despite the lingering exhaustion from the flood. A thrush and a scrawny mouse soon joined his cache, and Mudpaw felt a flicker of pride. At least his family would eat tonight.

As he moved to retrieve his buried prey, his paws carried him toward a shallow basin where the floodwaters had gathered and drained. The air grew cooler, the shadows deeper. A strange unease prickled at the back of his neck, but he pressed on, his curiosity outweighing his caution.

And then he saw it.

The stone.

It stood tall and gleaming, its surface scrubbed clean by the floodwaters. The pale, pearly-white shell shimmered faintly in the dappled sunlight, its imposing height stark against the dark, damp earth.

Mudpaw froze, his breath catching in his throat. The stone looked different now, more alive, more... deliberate. He took a hesitant

step forward, his paws sinking into the soft ground.

The whispers returned, soft and insistent, curling around his ears like tendrils of mist.

"Come closer," they murmured. *"We have waited for you."*

Mudpaw's legs moved before he could think, carrying him closer to the stone. His heart pounded as the voices grew louder, more distinct.

"Who are you?" he asked, his voice trembling.

"We are the voices of what was and what will be," one whispered. *"You have been chosen, Mudpaw. Chosen to hear us, to know us."*

"Chosen?" Mudpaw echoed, his voice barely audible. His claws scraped against the stone's smooth surface as he reached out to touch it. The coolness of the stone sent a shiver down his spine.

"The stone has called to you for a reason," another voice said, its tone soothing yet urgent. *"Will you listen?"*

The world around him seemed to fade, the weight of the whispers filling his mind. They spoke of destiny, of power, of a path only he could walk.

Mudpaw's heart raced, torn between fear and fascination. "Why me?" he whispered. "What do you want from me?"

"All will be revealed in time," the voices replied. *"But first, you must trust us. Trust the stone."*

The pull was irresistible, the whispers weaving a spell that rooted him to the spot. But then a sharp gust of wind snapped him out of the trance, the chill biting through his fur. He stumbled back, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

The stone loomed before him, silent and imposing once more. The whispers had faded, leaving only a faint hum that lingered in the back of his mind.

Mudpaw glanced at the prey he had dropped, a pang of guilt cutting through the haze. His family was waiting for him.

"I'll be back," he promised, his voice steady despite the whirlwind of emotions churning inside him.

The stone seemed to shimmer in acknowledgement, though Mudpaw couldn't be sure if it was the sunlight or something more. Shaking himself, he gathered the prey and turned away, his steps heavy as he made his way back toward the temporary camp.

Even as the stone disappeared from view, its presence lingered in his thoughts. The whispers, the promises, the strange sense of belonging– they clung to him, impossible to shake.

Mudpaw didn't know what the stone wanted or why it had chosen him, but one thing was certain: he would return.

Chapter 18

The wind carried a scent to Bumblepaw that made her stop dead in her tracks. It was faint, just a whisper of familiarity, but it was enough to make her heart lurch in her chest. She lifted her nose to the breeze, closing her eyes as she focused on it.

"Larkshell," she whispered, the name tumbling from her mouth like a prayer.

Her paws moved before her mind could catch up, carrying her through the tangled reeds and patches of muddy ground that lined the lake's shore. The scent grew stronger with every step, weaving a path that pulled her forward. Her heart raced, and for the first time since Larkshell's disappearance, hope burned brightly in her chest.

She rounded a bend and stopped at a small inlet where the lake curved gently into the land. Feathers– blue and black– were scattered on the ground, clinging to the mud. Bumblepaw's breath caught in her throat.

"This has to be it," she muttered, her voice barely above a whisper. She scanned the area, her yellow eyes darting over every inch of the shoreline.

But as she moved closer to the water's edge, the scent began to fade, whisked away by the breeze. Her ears flattened as panic clawed at her throat. "No, no, no. Come on!" she hissed, her claws scraping the mud as she searched for anything– any sign that Larkshell had been here.

She found nothing.

The hope that had carried her this far crumbled, and her body sagged under the weight of defeat. She sat heavily by the water's edge, her tail curling tightly around her paws. The lake stretched endlessly before her, its surface shimmering and calm. It mocked her with its stillness.

"Why?" Bumblepaw choked, her voice cracking. "Why would StarClan bring me here for this? Why give me hope just to take it away?"

The only response was the gentle lapping of water against the shore.

But the stillness didn't last.

A faint ripple disturbed the surface of the lake. Bumblepaw's ears twitched, but she didn't look up, too lost in her despair. The ripple grew, spreading outward until the water churned with unnatural energy.

Suddenly, the lake exploded.

The caiman burst from the water, its jaws wide and teeth gleaming like jagged stones. Bumblepaw leapt back, her claws digging into the muddy ground as the beast lunged at her.

This time, she didn't run.

Bumblepaw stood her ground, her eyes blazing with fury. "You!" she snarled, her voice shaking with rage. "You took her from me!"

The caiman hissed, its black eyes fixed on her as it snapped its jaws. It lunged again, but Bumblepaw dodged, rolling to the side and slashing at its snout with her claws.

"I'm not afraid of you!" she shouted, her voice echoing across the lake. "Not anymore!"

The caiman twisted, its massive tail lashing out and sending water spraying everywhere. Bumblepaw leapt onto a rock, her claws scraping for purchase as she avoided the blow.

"You think you can scare me?" she growled, crouching low as the caiman turned to face her again. "You think you can take my friend and get away with it?"

The beast lunged, jaws snapping dangerously close to her tail. Bumblepaw darted to the side, her heart pounding as adrenaline

surged through her veins. She lashed out again, her claws raking across the caiman's rough hide.

"You don't get to win!" she shouted, her voice hoarse from exertion. "Not this time!"

The caiman hissed in pain, its massive body thrashing in the water as it tried to dislodge her. Bumblepaw clung to a patch of reeds, her claws scraping the muddy ground as she steadied herself.

For a moment, the two stared at each other– predator and prey locked in a deadly standoff. Bumblepaw's breath came in ragged gasps, but she didn't back down.

"I'll make you pay," she whispered, her voice low and trembling with emotion. "For Larkshell, I'll make you pay."

The caiman growled, its tail lashing violently as it prepared to strike again. Bumblepaw braced herself, her claws flexing as she met the beast's gaze with unyielding determination.

She didn't know if she could even beat the caiman by herself or at all, but she knew one thing: she wouldn't run. Not this time.

*****

Bumblepaw stood in the middle of the camp, the scent of Larkshell clinging to her like a dream that refused to fade. Mud caked along her legs and exhaustion tugged at her every muscle. Cats gathered around her in a loose circle, their expressions a mix of curiosity, concern, and grief. Brightnose and Shelltail stood closest, their gazes piercing as if they could extract every detail from Bumblepaw's memory.

"I caught found a scent," Bumblepaw began, her voice steady despite the weight of the gazes of her Clanmates piercing her fur. "It was faint, but it was Larkshell's. I followed it toward the lake."

Gasps rippled through the gathered cats. Brightnose, Larkshell's mother, stepped forward, her purple-blue eyes shining with a mixture of hope and grief. "You found her scent?" she asked, her voice trembling. "You're sure?"

Bumblepaw nodded firmly. "I'm sure. It was her, I'd know it anywhere."

Beside Brightnose, Shelltail fell against her side, his stoic demeanor cracked by a flicker of hope and relief. Around them, Larkshell's siblings exchanged glaces, their faces a mix of cautious optimism and apprehension.

"But the trail..." Bumblepaw hesitated, her tail twitching nervously. "It ended at the lake. I couldn't find anything else."

"No," Brightnose whispered, taking a step back as she shook her head slightly. "That can't be. She wouldn't–"

"She's not in the lake," Bumblepaw interrupted firmly. "I don't think she is. The trail didn't end in the water– it just... stopped. Maybe she crossed it somehow. Maybe she's on the other side."

A moment of silence passed before Larkshell's siblings exchanged looked. Poolripple, his usually composed demeanor cracked by guilt, spoke up next. "You're sure?" he asked, his voice quieter than usual.

"I'm sure," Bumblepaw replied. She straightened, the strengthin her voice hardening. "But there's more. Everyone needs to hear this."

Around her, cats shifted closer, tension crackling in the air like a bolt of lightning.

"The caiman is in the lake," she said, her voice carrying through the camp like the snap of a branch.

Gasps erupted, and the crowd broke into chaos.

"It moved?" hissed Beechpool, her tail lashing.

"How could it be getting closer and closer?" Serpentstrike demanded.

Bumblepaw raised her voice above the din. "It attacked me!" she exclaimed, silencing the uproar. "It came out of the water, but I fought back."

The words hung in the air, heavy and impossible. Cats stared at her, disbelief and awe reflected in their wide eyes.

"You... fought it?" Snailpaw's voice broke the silence, his tone half incredulous and half admiring.

Bumblepaw nodded, her fur bristling as the memory surged through her. "I fought it. I didn't run this time. I couldn't. Not after everything it's taken. Not after it took–" Her voice faltered, but she swallowed hard and pressed on. "Not after it took Larkshell away."

Brightnose let out a soft cry and rushed to Bumblepaw, pressing her nose to the younger cat's forehead. "Thank you," she whispered, her voice breaking. "For fighting for her. For never giving up on her."

The words were almost too much for Bumblepaw to bear. She dipped her head, overwhelmed by the flood of emotions in Brightnose's voice. Around her, Larkshell's siblings began murmuring softly, hope flickering like fragile flames in their eyes.

As the group began to disperse, Snailpaw approached, his usual antagonistic demeanor replaced by something softer. He waited until they were a few tail-lengths away from the others before speaking.

"You fought it?" he asked, his tone quieter now but no less awed.

Bumblepaw met his gaze, her ears twitching. "Yeah. I fought it."

"That's incredible," Snailpaw said, his tail flicking. "Seriously. I don't think I'd have the courage to stand up to something like that."

Bumblepaw blinked, taken aback by the admiration in his voice. "Oh, um... thanks," she stammered, unsure of how to respond.

Snailpaw tilted his head, as though seeing her differently for the first time. A small smile played on his face. "You're something else, magpie. You did something no one else would've done. You gave us all a little hope today."

Her heart thudded in her chest, and she quickly looked away, her fur growing warm. "I just... I couldn't let it win. Not after what it's

done."

Snailpaw nodded, his expression serious. "Still, you did something no one else could. That's worth celebrating."

Before she could respond, he motioned toward the fresh-kill pile. "Want to share something? My treat."

Bumblepaw hesitated, then nodded. "Sure."

As they settled with a trout between them, Bumblepaw let herself relax for the first time since she'd caught Larkshell's scent. The Clan around her buzzed with quiet conversation, but for the first time since Larkshell's disappearance and the caiman's arrival, their voices were tinged with hope. It wasn't much, but it was something. And as she sat with Snailpaw, she allowed herself to believe– just for a moment– that maybe Larkshell was still out there. Alive.

Chapter 19

[image]

Mudpaw lay curled in his nest, staring blankly at the rough edges of the bramble walls that made up their temporary camp. The air was thick with the scent of damp earth, mildew, and the lingering staleness of floodwater. No matter how many times he washed his fur, the scent clung to him, a reminder everything the flood had stolen.

Sleep wouldn't come. It hadn't in the days since returning to the ruined camp. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw the water swallowing their camp, dragging bodies away, stealing lives.

A rustling nearby made his ears flick, and he glanced over to see Snippaw settling into his own nest. His brother's movements were stiff, almost mechanical, and his gaze was fixed on the ground as if it held all the answers he so desperately sought.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke.

It had been this way since the flood– strained silences, careful words, unspoken grief. Even before, he and Snippaw hadn't been especially close, not in the way he was with Eveningpaw. But they had always been brothers. That had to count for something, didn't it?

Mudpaw turned his head to the sky, barely able to make out the stars through the thick canopy of trees. He wondered if Elkstep was up there, watching. If Bearheart was, too.

"I keep dreaming about him," Snippaw finally said, his voice rough, cracking around the edges. He didn't look up. "Bearheart."

Mudpaw swallowed, shifting to face him fully.

"He's always there in my dreams. Telling me to keep my chin up. To focus. To be strong." Snippaw let out a bitter chuckle, but it held no

real amusement. "And then I wake up, and it's like... he was never there at all."

Mudpaw's throat felt tight. He understood that feeling all too well.

"I–I think of Elkstep all the time," he admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. "When I'm hunting, I think of the caiman lurking in the water. Sometimes I think I can feel him next to me, but when I turn to look at him... he's gone."

Snippaw's claws dug into the dirt, his tail curling tightly around his paws. "It's not fair." His voice wavered, and when he finally lifted his head to look at Mudpaw, his light green eyes burned with a mix of anger and sorrow. "They should still be here."

Mudpaw nodded, his own grief clawing at his chest. "I know."

For a moment, neither of them said anything. The night was quiet except for the occasional rustling of leaves, the distant hoot of an owl. The camp felt too still, too heavy with the weight of loss.

Snippaw exhaled sharply. "I keep thinking about what Bearheart would say. He wouldn't want me to sit here, wallowing in it. He'd tell me to keep moving forward. But I don't know how."

Mudpaw hesitated, then scooted closer, pressing his shoulder lightly against Snippaw's. It wasn't much, but Snippaw didn't pull away. That had to count for something.

"We'll figure it out," Mudpaw murmured, his voice steady despite the ache in his chest.

Snippaw let out a short, breathless laugh. "You sound like him."

Mudpaw blinked. "Like who?"

"Elkstep." Snippaw's lips twitched, the ghost of a smile flickering there just for a second before it disappeared. "He was always saying stuff like that."

Mudpaw huffed softly, warmth creeping into his ears. "Well... maybe he was right."

"Maybe."

The silence that followed wasn't as painful as before. They weren't okay. Not yet. But for the first time since Elkstep's death, Mudpaw felt like they were starting to find their way back to each other. And maybe, just maybe, that was enough.

*****

Mudpaw sat close to Snippaw, their pelts brushing as they huddled together near the edge of the rebuilding camp. The air was thick with tension, made worse by the low murmurs of arguing cats that rippled through the gathered Clanmates. Since the flood, their world had been turned upside down, and now, with the waters receding, it was becoming painfully clear that OakClan was no longer the same.

Mudpaw had been trying to rebuild his relationship with Snippaw, their bond strained after their fight over Swiftstar's leadership. But grief had a strange way of pulling cats back together. He had lost Elkstep, and Snippaw had lost Bearheart—wounds too fresh to ignore. Now, they had each other, and in moments like this, Mudpaw found comfort in his brother's presence.

"I miss him," Snippaw admitted quietly, barely above a whisper.

Mudpaw swallowed hard, his throat tight. "Me too."

They sat in silence for a moment, before Snippaw shifted slightly. "I know we fought about... everything before, but I don't care about that anymore. I just... I don't want us to keep fighting."

Mudpaw looked at his brother, searching his face. The hostility that had once burned between them had faded, replaced by exhaustion and something softer—understanding. He nodded. "Me neither."

Before Snippaw could respond, voices raised in anger made them both turn their heads. Near the center of the camp, a cluster of warriors had gathered, their tones growing sharper by the second.

"You call this leadership?" Finchspots snarled, his tail lashing. "Swiftstar has led us to ruin! If we don't leave this territory, we'll all

die."

"And go where?" Amberheart snapped back, stepping forward with her claws unsheathed. "DawnClan and GlacierClan would never take us all in, and we have no right to their lands. We must rebuild."

"Rebuild what?" Wildwing interjected, his voice hard. Mudpaw's ears twitched as he recognized his father's tone—low, dangerous, the way he spoke before a fight. "The camp is destroyed, our prey is drowned, and Swiftstar has already lost three lives because he's too stubborn to admit he's led us into disaster. How many more cats have to die before we do something?"

Mudpaw's stomach clenched. His father was standing in the thick of it, his pelt bristling as he faced Amberheart and her supporters.

"Wildwing's right," another cat added. "Swiftstar isn't fit to lead anymore. We should choose a new leader before he gets the rest of us killed."

A furious yowl broke through the crowd as Swiftstar himself pushed forward, his fur drenched from the constant dampness of the temporary camp. "Is that what you want?" he demanded, his voice rough. "To turn on your leader when we need unity the most?"

Wildwing didn't back down. "What I want is to survive! And if you were truly thinking of the Clan instead of your own pride, you'd step down!"

Mudpaw felt his heart pound in his chest. He wanted to move, to say something, but his paws felt frozen to the ground. His father was at the center of a rebellion, standing against the leader of OakClan, and he was powerless to stop it.

"I will not abandon my Clan!" Swiftstar growled. "Not while I still have lives to give!"

A hiss rose from the warriors at Wildwing's side. "Then maybe we should take them from you."

A fight exploded before Mudpaw could even process the words.

Claws flashed as warriors lunged at one another, the air filled with snarls and yowls of fury. Mudpaw saw Amberheart sink her claws into Wildwing's side, only for his father to throw her off with a powerful shove. Finchspots tackled a warrior loyal to Swiftstar, the two rolling across the muddy ground in a tangle of fur and flashing teeth. More cats were jumping in, some trying to break up the battle, others joining the chaos.

"Mudpaw—" Snippaw's voice was urgent beside him. "We need to do something."

But Mudpaw couldn't move. He watched as his father fought with everything he had, rage burning in his eyes. He saw Swiftstar bleeding, snarling as he struggled against two warriors at once. He saw his Clanmates turning on each other, their grief and anger reaching a boiling point.

Everything was falling apart, and he didn't know where he stood.

His claws dug into the earth as he forced himself to breathe. What was he supposed to do? Pick a side? Fight his own Clanmates? Attack his own father?

No. He couldn't.

He stayed frozen as the battle raged around him, his heart pounding so loudly it drowned out the rest of the world.

OakClan was breaking.

And Mudpaw didn't know how to fix it.

Chapter 20

Bumblepaw's ears twitched as the faint murmur of voices stirred her from sleep. The apprentice den was dark and heavy with the warmth of her sleeping denmates, but something in the hushed whispers outside sent a ripple of unease through her fur. Blinking the drowsiness from her eyes, she lifted her head, straining to listen.

A breeze rustled through the camp, and for a moment, she thought she had imagined the voices. Then, another whisper—urgent, hurried. Bumblepaw carefully stepped over the other apprentices, weaving through the cramped space until she reached the den entrance. She poked her head out, her breath catching at the sight before her.

A small group of warriors, their pelts glowing faintly in the moonlight, stood near the camp's edge. Snowtrail, his dark tabby coat barely distinguishable in the dim light, was at the front, his expression tense. Beside him, Stonebriar and Speckledawn whispered among themselves, their tails flicking anxiously. But what truly made Bumblepaw's stomach drop was Beechpool, standing slightly apart from the others, her rounded belly visible even in the darkness.

They were leaving.

Bumblepaw pushed out of the den, her paws hitting the damp earth as she strode toward them. "What are you doing?" she demanded, her voice sharp in the quiet night.

The group froze. Snowtrail turned first, his ears flattened slightly, but his gaze was steady. "We're leaving, Bumblepaw."

Bumblepaw's fur bristled. "Leaving?" She shot a glance at Beechpool's swollen belly before looking back at Snowtrail. "You're abandoning NightClan?"

"NightClan is no longer safe," Snowtrail said. "You know it as well

as we do."

Bumblepaw gritted her teeth. Of course, she knew. The caiman's presence loomed over them like a shadow, and the flooding had stripped away the security of their home. But leaving?

"That doesn't mean you can just run," she snapped. "What about your Clanmates? What about Maplestar? You think abandoning them will fix anything?"

"We've already made our decision," Stonebriar interjected, his voice low but firm. "We've lost too much, Bumblepaw. How many more have to die before we accept that this territory is cursed?"

Beechpool stepped forward then, her blue-purple eyes filled with a sorrow Bumblepaw hadn't expected. "I found out only a few days ago that I'm expecting kits," she admitted softly. "And I won't bring them into a place where they'll be hunted before they can even open their eyes."

Bumblepaw stared at her, unable to find words. Beechpool had always been a dedicated warrior, never one to back down from hardship. But now, she looked tired. Worn down. Afraid.

"Where will you go?" Bumblepaw finally asked, her voice quieter now.

"Just outside NightClan territory," Snowtrail answered. "We'll make our own little group. We may not get a substantial amount of territory, but we need higher, more stable ground than risking death here."

Bumblepaw's claws dug into the soft ground. She wanted to argue, to call them cowards, to demand they stay and fight for their home. But what could she say? She had seen the fear in her Clanmates' eyes every day. The doubt. The despair. And now, that fear had won.

"We won't forget NightClan," Snowtrail murmured. "And we won't forget you."

Bumblepaw swallowed hard. The lump in her throat made it

impossible to respond, so she simply stepped back, letting them pass. One by one, they disappeared into the darkness, their paw steps fading into silence.

Bumblepaw stood there long after they were gone, the cold night air pressing against her fur. She had fought the caiman, stood her ground against a beast—but this felt like a loss she couldn't fight.

Finally, she turned and padded back toward the apprentice den, but sleep would not come for the rest of the night.

*****

The morning sun barely pierced through the heavy clouds still lingering from the storm, casting an eerie gloom over the NightClan camp. The air was thick with the damp scent of mud and waterlogged earth, a constant reminder of the recent flood. Bumblepaw felt the tension in the air before she even stepped out of the apprentice's den.

Voices rose and fell in heated discussion, some sharp with anger, others trembling with fear. She hesitated before stepping forward, her heart pounding. Snowtrail and the others were gone, and now the entire Clan was realizing it.

"They just left?" Maplestar's sharp voice cut through the chatter. The tortoiseshell-and-white leader stood on a slightly elevated patch of dry ground, her yellow eyes burning with frustration.

"Without even saying a word to the rest of us?" Brokenflower, a senior warrior, lashed her tail against the muddy ground. "What does that say about them? About us?"

Bumblepaw swallowed hard, stepping forward. "They... they told me they were leaving."

The crowd turned on her instantly. Dozens of eyes locked onto her, a mix of emotions swirling in their gazes—accusation, disbelief, and curiosity.

"You knew?" Poolripple looked at her with something between

shock and hurt. "And you didn't stop them?"

Bumblepaw took a deep breath, willing herself to stay steady. "They didn't want to stay. Snowtrail said it was too dangerous with the caiman still lurking, and Beechpool..." She hesitated, flicking her tail. "Beechpool is expecting kits. She didn't want to raise them with a predator threatening the Clan."

"She's expecting?" Brightnose gasped, glancing toward where Beechpool had slept the night before.

"This is cowardice," Nettlethorn growled, his fur bristling. "Running off in the night like rogues? They abandoned their Clanmates when we need every set of paws we can get."

"And yet, are they wrong?" Someone else muttered, and the camp fell into uneasy silence. Bumblepaw recognized the voice as Otterflower, an older warrior who had barely spoken since the flood. Her words sent a ripple through the Clan, an unspoken truth hovering in the air.

No one wanted to say it, but the fear was there. The caiman was still out there. The flood had destroyed everything.

"How do we even know we're safe here?" Otterflower continued, curling her tail protectively around her remaining kit. "What if the water rises again? What if the caiman comes back?"

Maplestar's eyes blazed as she raised her chin. "Are you suggesting we all leave?"

Silence. Uneasy shifting. Some cats looked away, while others exchanged glances. The leader's question hung in the air, heavy and suffocating.

"I'm saying we should think about our options," Otterflower finally said, her voice softer but still firm.

Bumblepaw's claws flexed into the damp earth. She hadn't realized just how much of the Clan was feeling this way. Last night, she had convinced herself that Snowtrail and the others were a small exception, a few cats who had given up—but now, looking at her

Clanmates, she wasn't sure.

She caught sight of Larkshell's siblings—Beechpool had left, but Juniperfoot and Serpentstrike sat together, their expressions unreadable. Brightnose and Shelltail, their parents, murmured quietly, grief lining their faces.

Would they leave, too, if it meant finding their missing daughter? Bumblepaw's ears flattened. The thought left a bitter taste in her mouth. Was she a coward for not going after Snowtrail and the others? Or was she a fool for staying?

She had spent so long searching for Larkshell, chasing fading scents and hope—but what if she was clinging to something that was already gone? And if Larkshell was out there, somewhere beyond the lake, would she want Bumblepaw to stay here?

"Enough." Maplestar's voice cut through the murmurs. "We are not leaving. This is our home. We will rebuild, we will survive. If Snowtrail and the others don't want to be part of NightClan anymore, then that is their choice—but I will not allow doubt to break us apart."

The finality in her tone sent a shiver down Bumblepaw's spine, but she wasn't sure if it reassured her or made her feel worse. As the Clan slowly dispersed, some still grumbling, Bumblepaw remained rooted in place, staring at the edge of camp where Snowtrail and the others had vanished into the night.

Should she have gone with them? Or was staying the right choice? She didn't know anymore.

And that terrified her most of all.

Chapter 21

[image]

Mudpaw's ears were still ringing from the shouts, the snarls, the clash of fur against fur. Even now, the bitter scent of battle clung to the air, a sharp contrast to the usual earthy calm of OakClan's camp. His limbs ached from standing still too long, his paws rooted to the damp ground as he struggled to process what had just happened.

The battle had been brief, but the wounds it left behind—both physical and emotional—would last far longer.

"Come on," Wildwing said sharply, ushering his family deeper into the shadows at the edge of camp. His father's voice was low but urgent, his tail lashing behind him. "We need to talk. Now."

Mudpaw glanced toward Swiftstar's den, where a low murmur was already starting among the other cats. His throat tightened. Had this really happened? Had his Clanmates—cats he'd trained beside, hunted with, fought for—really turned tooth and claw against each other?

He followed his family in a daze. Hailfrost was tense beside him, her usually sharp eyes dull with exhaustion. Eveningpaw and Snippaw lingered close, exchanging uncertain glances. Silverwing, standing slightly apart, looked the least surprised of them all, as if she'd seen this coming long before any of them.

Once they were far enough from prying ears, Wildwing turned to face them, his expression grave. "This can't go on," he growled. "OakClan isn't safe anymore. We need to leave."

Mudpaw felt like the ground had been pulled out from under him. "Leave?" he echoed, ears flattening. "You mean... leave the *Clan*?"

Hailfrost nodded, her expression unreadable. "We don't have a choice," she said, voice tight. "Swiftstar has lost control. The flood, the caiman, and now this? We can't trust him to lead us anymore."

Mudpaw's chest tightened. "But... where would we even *go*?" He looked desperately between his parents, his siblings. "This is our home. What about our friends? The cats who *didn't* fight?"

Wildwing's gaze darkened. "We can't afford to think about them right now. We need to focus on *our* survival. The caiman is still out there, the camp is barely livable after the flood, and Swiftstar just proved that he'd rather turn on his own Clanmates than admit he's unfit to lead."

Mudpaw's ears twitched. It felt *wrong*. All of it. OakClan had survived for generations—through floods, through hardships, through leaders who weren't perfect. They were meant to stand together, weren't they?

Before he could argue, movement on the Tall Tree drew his attention. Swiftstar had leapt up, his black-and-white pelt still bearing the marks of battle. His wounds were fresh, but his eyes were colder than ever.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the Tall Tree!" His voice rang across camp, sharp as an unsheathed claw.

Mudpaw's stomach churned. He already knew. Swiftstar *already knew*.

One by one, battered and weary cats filtered toward the clearing. Some held their heads high in defiance, others slumped with exhaustion. The tension was suffocating.

Wildwing stepped protectively in front of his family, his tail flicking for them to stay put. Mudpaw barely heard whatever words Swiftstar said next—something about treason, about defying the warrior code, about *betrayal*.

Then, the final blow fell.

"To those who raised claws against their own Clanmates—*you are no longer welcome in OakClan*."

A stunned silence gripped the clearing.

Wildwing's breath came out in a hiss. "That coward," he spat under his breath. Hailfrost stiffened beside him, her claws digging into the dirt. Snippaw's tail bristled as he pressed against Eveningpaw.

Mudpaw couldn't breathe.

One by one, the names of the exiled were called. Familiar names. Friends. Cats he'd grown up with. And then—

"Wildwing."

His father lifted his chin, refusing to look away from Swiftstar's unyielding stare.

"Hailfrost."

Mudpaw's mother didn't flinch. Her shoulders were squared, her face unreadable.

"Your kits."

Mudpaw's stomach twisted. That meant *him*. That meant Snippaw, Eveningpaw—all of them.

No. No, this wasn't right. He hadn't fought! He hadn't *done* anything! He looked wildly at Silverwing, but the older warrior's face was shadowed with something unreadable.

"Leave," Swiftstar finished, his voice like ice. "By sundown, or be treated as rogues."

The Clan erupted into murmurs, some shocked, some furious, some... approving. Mudpaw's legs felt weak beneath him.

This wasn't happening.

But as Wildwing turned, his tail brushing across Mudpaw's back in a silent command to move, he knew there was no stopping it now.

He had just lost his home.

*****

The night air was thick with silence, broken only by the uneven pawsteps of the exiled as they trudged forward, away from the only home they had ever known. Mudpaw walked stiffly between Eveningpaw and Snippaw, his pelt brushing against theirs for comfort, but it did nothing to calm the storm raging inside him. His ears rang with the echoes of Swiftstar's decree, the cold finality in the leader's voice as he cast them out like they were nothing more than fox-hearted traitors.

Exile.

The word felt foreign. Impossible. But here they were, forced to abandon OakClan's territory under the watchful eyes of the warriors escorting them, as if they were criminals.

Wildwing led at the front, his head high, his tail flicking with every step. He looked determined. Almost proud. Beside him, Hailfrost moved with careful, measured steps, her eyes flickering toward her kits every few moments. Mudpaw saw the concern behind her usually composed expression, but she said nothing.

No one did.

Not until the patrol came to a halt at the edge of the territory, where OakClan's scent began to thin into unfamiliar woods. The escorting warriors exchanged glances before stepping back.

"This is where we leave you," one of them, Mooseheart, said coolly. His claws flexed against the dirt, and his whiskers twitched with barely concealed disgust. "Don't come back."

Wildwing smirked. "Oh, we won't."

Mudpaw's stomach twisted at the arrogance in his father's voice, but he bit his tongue as the OakClan warriors turned without another word and disappeared into the trees.

The moment they were gone, the weight of it all crashed down on him. They were really exiled. They had no camp, no friends, no mentors. They weren't warriors—they weren't even Clan cats anymore. His legs wobbled, and he barely felt Snippaw press

against his side for support.

Wildwing turned to face them. "We need to keep moving. There's no telling if Swiftstar will send more patrols after us."

Hailfrost shifted uneasily. "We should rest. The kits are exhausted."

Eveningpaw and Snippaw flinched at being called kits, but they said nothing. Mudpaw barely noticed; his blood was boiling as he stepped forward.

"Where are we even going?" he demanded. "What's the plan, Wildwing?"

His father blinked at him, clearly unimpressed by his outburst. "We survive. We regroup. And when the time is right, we make sure Swiftstar is forced to step down."

Mudpaw's fur bristled. "Are you serious? You're still talking about that?"

Wildwing narrowed his eyes. "Of course, I am. Swiftstar is weak. He's put the entire Clan in danger. That's why we had to—"

"That's why we had to what?" Mudpaw snapped, his tail lashing behind him. "Attack our own Clanmates? Get exiled? Lose everything?"

Wildwing's eyes darkened. "I did what was necessary."

Mudpaw let out a hollow laugh. "Necessary? You attacked Hailfrost's father! You divided the Clan! You got us thrown out of our home, and for what?"

Wildwing's ears flattened. "I did it for our family. For you."

"No," Mudpaw growled, stepping closer. "You did it for yourself. If you cared about us, you wouldn't have dragged us into this! Because of you, we've lost everything!" His voice cracked at the end, and he hated the way it made him sound. Weak. Hurt.

Wildwing's tail lashed. "Swiftstar would have ruined us—"

"He was our leader," Mudpaw cut in. "And you're the one who ruined everything."

Silence fell between them, thick and suffocating. Eveningpaw and Snippaw stood frozen, their eyes darting between Mudpaw and Wildwing like they were waiting for claws to be drawn. Even Hailfrost, who had been so quiet, was watching with an unreadable expression.

Wildwing's gaze burned into Mudpaw, but for once, he had nothing to say. And that, more than anything, made Mudpaw feel sick.

Finally, Hailfrost cleared her throat. "We should find shelter," she said, her voice carefully even. "We can talk about this later."

Wildwing exhaled sharply and turned away without another word.

Mudpaw clenched his jaw as he felt Snippaw nudge him, a silent gesture to let it go. But how could he? His father had destroyed their lives, and he refused to even admit it.

Still, as they began to move again, Mudpaw swallowed his anger and walked beside his siblings. He didn't know where they were going, and he didn't know what would happen next.

But he did know one thing: he didn't trust Wildwing anymore.

Epilogue

Silverwing sat in the center of OakClan's camp, her fur prickling under the wary stares of her Clanmates. The morning sun cast long, sharp shadows over the clearing, but despite the light, a suffocating unease clung to the air. Since Wildwing and his followers had been exiled, the once-lively camp had been reduced to hushed whispers and sidelong glances. No one spoke openly about what had happened, but Silverwing could feel the weight of unasked questions pressing in on her.

"Silverwing."

She turned at the sound of her mother's voice. Pearpool stood with her tail curled tightly around her paws, her expression tight with suspicion. Beside her, Silverwing's father, Larkflight, studied her with narrowed eyes, his thick, dark fur bristling ever so slightly.

"You knew what Wildwing was planning, didn't you?" Pearpool accused, her voice hushed but sharp as claws. "You were always close with Mudpaw. You must have heard something."

Silverwing sucked in a breath, forcing her fur to stay flat. "I had no idea," she said firmly. "I was friends with Mudpaw, but he never said anything about his father's plans. If I had known-" She hesitated, her claws flexing against the hard earth. "If I had known, I would've stopped him."

Larkflight's gaze was unreadable, but Pearpool's tail lashed. "I want to believe you, but the Clan is in chaos because of what happened. Swiftstar is growing more paranoid by the day, and any cat even suspected of sympathy for Wildwing's group is under scrutiny."

"I had nothing to do with it," Silverwing insisted, her voice tense. "If Swiftstar wants to question me, let him. But I was loyal to OakClan before, and I still am now."

Before Pearpool could respond, a yowl split the air. Swiftstar stood

atop the Tall Tree, his hazel eyes scanning the camp like a hawk searching for prey. His once-proud form seemed diminished, his fur less groomed than usual, his expression tight with exhaustion. But his voice was sharp as ever when he spoke.

"Let me make one thing clear," he announced, his gaze burning into every cat below. "OakClan is strong. We have survived the flood, we will deal with the caiman, and we will not be divided by traitors." His tail lashed as he continued. "As long as I have 'star' in my name, as long as I have my nine lives and StarClan's blessing, I will lead this Clan."

Silverwing swallowed hard. The words weren't just a declaration-they were a warning.

Around her, murmurs rippled through the gathered warriors. Some nodded in agreement, but others exchanged wary glances. Swiftstar's paranoia was getting worse, and even the most loyal cats were beginning to notice.

"Does he really think StarClan still stands with him after all this?" A hushed whisper came from the side, and Silverwing turned her head slightly, recognizing Ripplefire's tense expression as he spoke quietly to Shimmertail.

"He's grasping at control," Shimmertail muttered back. "If we have another disaster, I don't know how much longer the Clan will stand by him."

Silverwing tore her gaze away, unease curling in her stomach. How long could a leader hold power when half the Clan had already begun to doubt him?

But the meeting wasn't over. Swiftstar straightened, taking in the crowd with a sharp gaze before continuing. "We will not falter. Today, OakClan will move forward. Pansykit and Thunderkit have reached their third moon, and it is time they take their first steps toward becoming warriors."

The tension in the camp eased just slightly at the change in subject. Silverwing forced herself to focus as Swiftstar beckoned the two kits

forward. They approached hesitantly, clearly aware of the lingering unease in the air.

"Pansykit, from this moment forward, you will be known as Pansypaw. Thornglow will be your mentor."

Thornglow stepped forward, touching his nose to the new apprentice's head. Pansypaw did her best to look excited, but Silverwing could see the way her ears twitched uneasily.

"Thunderkit," Swiftstar continued, "you will be Thunderpaw. Your mentor will be Hemlockstripe."

Silverwing watched as the ceremony concluded, the usual excitement of apprenticeship dulled by the lingering shadows of the past moon. The Clan cheered, but it lacked heart, as if every cat was simply going through the motions.

As the Clan began to disperse, Silverwing's gaze drifted toward the camp entrance. Beyond those brambles, somewhere out in the vast unknown, Mudpaw and his family were on their own, exiled from the only home they had ever known. Were they safe? Did they have shelter? StarClan only knew.

A soft sigh escaped her. For all of Swiftstar's assurances, for all of his rigid control, OakClan was teetering on the edge of something fragile. And she wasn't sure how much longer it would hold.

She could only hope that, wherever he was, Mudpaw was safe-and that somehow, some way, StarClan would lead them all toward the answers they so desperately needed.